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Robert Ekkebus

Illinois Wesleyan University

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Abstract

Oliver Cromwell was not born a genius like Napoleon and was well into the latter half of his unimpressive and quiet life by the time he was elected to the Long Parliament. Despite this, in slightly over a decade Cromwell became the strongest person in England. His rise to the top involved many steps and Cromwell never seemed to lose momentum on his way up. Yet he was not a political mastermind. He was not always successful in bringing about his desired results, and he did not show consistently great political abilities that one would think would be necessary to become Lord Protector of England. This raises the question of why Cromwell was able to rise to the top from obscurity in merely thirteen years, and how much of this was because of his abilities, and how much was through luck and position.

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Oliver Cromwell was not born a genius like Napoleon and was well into the latter half of his unimpressive and quiet life by the time he was elected to the Long Parliament. Despite this, in slightly over a decade Cromwell became the strongest person in England. His rise to the top involved many steps and Cromwell never seemed to lose momentum on his way up. Yet he was not a political mastermind. He was not always successful in bringing about his desired results, and he did not show consistently great political abilities that one would think would be necessary to become Lord Protector of England. This raises the question of why Cromwell was able to rise to the top from obscurity in merely thirteen years, and how much of this was because of his abilities, and how much was through luck and position.

There is no denying the fact that in many instances, Oliver Cromwell was in the right place at the most opportune time and that events often seemed to work in his favor through sheer luck, assuming that he had no hand in them. The most important one of these was his exclusion from the Self-Denying Ordinance, which cemented his future possibilities because of his important role operating between the army and Parliament. This is very important to understand, for it is because Cromwell was so closely intertwined with the army as well as being a politician of influence that he had the power to make his suggestions heard and push forth his programs. This dual-role is more than anything the key to Cromwell's success, for it made him a one-of-a-kind person in his time. Yet despite his hugely important position, he still was, as modern scholar Peter

Gaunt says, “far from stupid,” and his own abilities certainly had some impact on his meteoric rise to power, no matter how good his position may have been.¹ As we shall see, he deserved every bit of fame from his splendid military performance but his political showing was not stellar. However, it was his military performance that gave him the power to maintain a high level political position and in that respect he was not particularly lucky, just incredibly skilled.

The two areas of Cromwell’s life that are therefore of interest are military and political. His military command can be separated into two timeframes: as a lower-level officer in the First Civil War and as the overall commander from 1648 to 1651. His political career can be broken into three: his rise from junior MP to an important figure in Charles’ execution from 1640 to 1649, his role as the strongest, but not only figure in English politics from 1649 to 1653, and his role as Lord Protector from 1653 to 1658. However, for this study the last one is unnecessary, for its purpose is to assess how Cromwell’s ability and position enabled him to become Lord Protector.

Minor Command in The First Civil War: 1642-1646

As a military commander Cromwell was nothing special in the beginning. He proved to be a meticulous organizer, and his innovative methods helped distinguish him from everyone else, but that was it. However, he steadily participated in successful field engagements and rose up through the ranks.

Both the Cavaliers and the Roundheads were not particularly skilled in military affairs, both at the individual soldier level and at that of a commander. Thus it was not

¹ Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 226

particularly hard for Cromwell to start to distinguish himself when he was up against such “stiff” competition as the Earls of Essex or Manchester, whose only strong attribute was their sheer incompetence.

Aside from recruiting a solid body of men who would fight with discipline and loyalty, Cromwell’s major military contribution in the English Civil War was to keep order within the ranks of the cavalry after a charge.² This is something that the other cavalry forces lacked during the times; Prince Rupert’s cavalry spent the battle of Edgehill chasing after the fleeing enemy and trying to ransack their camp when they could have smashed into the Roundhead rear and won a decisive victory. On the other hand, Cromwell’s finely trained troops routed the Cavalier flank at Naseby and then turned around and finished their infantry in the center, causing a total rout. This was nothing out of the ordinary in military affairs; Hannibal had used it to win at Cannae as had Scipio at Zama. Yet because his opponents and rivals performed so poorly, Cromwell was constantly promoted until he reached overall command of the army during the Second Civil War. It is only here that Cromwell’s real talents were displayed to their fullest.

It is difficult to discern how skilled Cromwell was in the beginning of his military career compared to the end of it. This is chiefly because of the difference in positions held. While Cromwell’s performance as a regional recruiter or cavalry commander may have been solid, but nothing overly special, there was not that much freedom for him to show any more talents he may have had. So whether he was like Napoleon, able to perform his best at the first chance he got, or more of a Turenne, gathering experience

² Ibid., 227-8.

throughout his life, is difficult to determine. What is clear is that there is a remarkable difference between the armies commanded by Cromwell from 1648 to 1651 and the armies commanded in the First Civil War.

Unlike the contemporary Thirty Years War, there were no real quality commanders (commanding an entire army) during the First English Civil War. In comparison to Gustavus, Wallenstein, Turenne, and de Conde, the English had just Rupert and Fairfax, who were quite ordinary. Battles were fought at whim and won based on numerical superiority, rather than maneuver or psychological strikes. Thus, Cromwell had little quality first-hand material to utilize as experience when he assumed command in 1648, and it is abundantly clear from his performance that he was not just copying the incompetence or mediocrity that he had witnessed.

Cromwell was certainly an unorthodox military leader, and this was seen from the very beginning in his attempts at recruiting. While members of the nobility and professional soldiers were in high demand at the time, Cromwell defied the norm and emphasized recruiting soldiers based on their beliefs and how strongly they felt about these beliefs rather than their rank. As he wrote to the Suffolk county committee in September 1643, "I had rather have a plain russet-coated captain that knows what he fights for, and loves what he knows, than that which you call a gentleman and is nothing else. I honour a gentleman that is so indeed."³ This was a key part of what would later become the New Model Army, a group of loyal, well-disciplined men who would not break ranks in combat. A Roundhead newspaper described his troops as follows: "As for Cromwell, he hath 2,000 brave men, well disciplined: no man swears but he pays his

³ Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd, 1970), 49.

twelve pence...insomuch that the countries where they come leap for joy of them, and come in and join with them. How happy were it if all the forces were thus disciplined.”⁴ It was this force that won the day at Marston Moor and proceeded to smash the Cavalier flank and center at Naseby, the two key battles of the First Civil War.

Cromwell in Command: 1648-1651

Cromwell’s first attempt at real command came in 1648 where he suppressed a revolt in Wales, then quickly marched north to hold off the powerful invading Scottish force with just 9,000 men.⁵ Cromwell, showing a skilled use of maneuver by positioning himself on the Scottish rear, was able to descend upon the paralyzed and strung out army and defeat it piecemeal.⁶ This was certainly an important and economic victory, purchased with few losses yet defeating a superior army and preventing an invasion of England at a crucial time. While a strategic rear barrage upon a mediocre opponent is not particularly difficult, it provides a much different and superior approach than the head-on clashes in the First Civil War. Unfortunately for Cromwell, he would not be able to employ his strategic skill nearly as much in the restricted war in Ireland.

The overall performance of Cromwell in Ireland is mixed. While his strong effort to keep his troops well supplied and in good morale averted a possible disaster, he still suffered a great number of casualties for a nine-month campaign without a field battle. He had tried his best to get the Irish to surrender peacefully to pacify Ireland quickly, and

⁴ Wilbur Cortez Abbott. *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, (Oxford University Press, 1939), 1: 231 quoted in Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 50.

⁵ Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 95.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-96.

this worked at places such as New Ross, but he still was unable to conquer all the important strongholds, such as at Duncannon and Waterford.⁷ Overall he had broken many of the Irish strongholds, but the war in Ireland still dragged on for another three years. 20th century scholar W.C. Abbott spells out the campaign's relative lack of difficulty: "He did not conquer the Irish, he never even met any of their armies in the field. The way was paved for him by Jones' victory at Rathmines, without which his task would have been incomparably more difficult. He faced a defeated and discouraged enemy with a superior force and with vastly superior resources...."⁸ The lesson is rather clear: Cromwell did not perform at the same level in siege warfare that he did when he could maneuver.

The Scottish campaign of 1650 showed weaknesses in Cromwell's strategic maneuvering and planning, but also demonstrated Cromwell's ability to find any weakness and exploit with devastating success. The tactical skill displayed here was at a top level, and is certainly worlds apart from anyone in the First Civil War. At first things went rather poorly for Cromwell, for he was unable to get the Scots to fight and was maneuvered into an unfavorable position: the enemy had blocked off his retreat and supply lines to England.⁹ Yet in this horrible position, reduced to 11,000 men from an original 16,000 and at danger of total destruction by a superior foe, Cromwell was able to seize upon a moment of weakness and rolled up the Scottish army from the left flank with the advantage of surprise, shattering the opposing army. Out of around 22,000 men, Leslie escaped with 4,000, with over half taken prisoner. Though Cromwell writes that

⁷ Ibid., 120.

⁸ Wilbur Cortez Abbott, *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 2: 257.

⁹ Ibid., 312.

only twenty English were lost, that seems rather ridiculous. Nonetheless, his overall losses were miniscule in comparison to the Scots.¹⁰ Unfortunately for Cromwell, he was unable to follow up with his momentous success due to illness. Nevertheless, this was an economic victory that took out three-quarters of the main Scottish army, something that was not seen in the English Civil War of 1642-6. It is all the more brilliant because Cromwell was facing a quality opponent; a maneuver to cut off the line of retreat of a foe and corner him was only applied in the First Civil War against the woefully incompetent Essex. While Cromwell was clearly defeated in strategy, his tactical skill in extricating himself and destroying the main Scottish resistance in one blow was displayed beyond doubt. The victory was so surprising and complete that even Leslie agreed that it was a Divine Miracle.¹¹

By the time Cromwell was finally recovered from illness in 1651, Leslie was able to recruit and train another army. And again, Leslie's Fabian strategy prevented Cromwell from gaining the decisive victory that he needed to break the Scottish resistance. With the threat of hunger and sickness approaching, Cromwell needed a new plan. Unable to lure Leslie out of his strongholds even by destroying a fort within sight of the main army, Cromwell commenced a daring maneuver designed to utterly destroy the Scottish resistance in one decisive blow.¹² In a series of short sieges and minor conquests, Cromwell made his way from in front of the enemy position to nearly behind, cutting off Leslie's sources of supply and turning the tables on the Scots. However, Cromwell had conveniently left the way to England open behind him, and faced with the

¹⁰ Ibid., 318-322.

¹¹ Ibid., 319.

¹² Ibid., 427-430.

choices of starvation and desertion, a battle with every advantage to Cromwell, or a chance to bring the war into England itself, the Scots marched south.¹³ Cromwell's plan was brilliant because it limited the foe to several options, all of which would have likely led to total destruction. The most attractive option was clearly the invasion-of-England, and that worked only to Cromwell's advantage. As Abbott says, "Still, he did not hurry, and it seems apparent that he had, in fact, determined to let Charles [Charles II overrode Leslie and backed the invasion of England strategy] run his head into a trap whence there was no escape."¹⁴ By marching down the only available path into England, Cromwell had leisurely planned a full trap that would annihilate the Scots in one blow. According to Abbott, "Their condition, as many of them realized, was not merely ridiculous but desperate. With Harrison before them and Lambert in their rear, with Parliamentary forces converging on them from all parts of England, with Fairfax organizing the Yorkshire militia, and Cromwell with nine foot regiments making what haste he could..."¹⁵ The result was predictable enough: the demoralized Scottish army was completely scattered at Worcester, halting the doomed expedition and essentially ending the Scottish war.¹⁶

Cromwell's victory is all the more superb when his situation is examined more closely. His first task was to bring the Scots to a decisive engagement, an already difficult proposition given Leslie's strategy of keeping to the hills and strongholds and letting starvation and desertion work its course. Secondly, he needed to fight a battle where the Scots would have nowhere to run when they were defeated, for it would be no

¹³ Ibid., 431-436

¹⁴ Ibid., 445.

¹⁵ Ibid., 446-7.

¹⁶ Ibid., 462-3.

good to have to spend many more months mopping up stubborn Scottish resistance. The fact is that he was able not only to herd the Scots to a place of his choosing, but he was able to heavily demoralize them, making the ensuing battle far less costly and far more decisive than a direct assault in Scotland would have been.

Whether this master plan shows Cromwell's incredible capability of learning from direct experience, or merely that his situation became suited to his talents, is too hard to tell. It would be more reasonable to assume the former, for not only did Cromwell carry out the same type of maneuver that Leslie had done to him a year previously, Cromwell did not leave himself vulnerable to any tactical blow. Furthermore, it was all the more difficult for him to carry out this strategic barrage given that he was campaigning in unfriendly country. Finally, Cromwell deserves recognition here not just because of his military ability in achieving solid victories at little cost, but he was also able to finally bring peace to England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland far more quickly than anyone else in his time could have.

Cromwell's military career is mixed with efforts to get his opponents to surrender or even just come to terms peacefully. This is a marked distinction compared to other top commanders in history. While Cromwell's efforts were often, yet understandably, not successful, there were times that he succeeded in getting an enemy army to surrender almost solely by persuasion of words, most notably at New Ross, which is a noteworthy accomplishment indeed. Here in 1651 Cromwell's remarkably brief military experience ends. He served less than 7-8 years in the field yet in these years he proved himself at the level of Marlborough and Wellington, the elite of English military leaders. In these years

he earned the recognition and support from the army that would be crucial for gaining and keeping his political position.

Cromwell on the Political Rise: 1642-1648

Cromwell in the beginning was little more than a junior MP, having no real influence to do anything besides twiddle his thumbs in the back. However, that does not mean that he was not learning or using his time poorly. Cromwell had to learn the skill of a politician quite abruptly, and it is clear that the early years of the 1640s were not put to waste. In the beginning all Cromwell could do was to serve with the upper tier politicians in the background, make connections, and get himself known. According to modern scholar J.C. Davis, "It is these connections which explain the large number of Commons committees, some of them critical ones, to which the relatively inexperienced MP was rapidly re-appointed and the growing frequency with which he was used as a Commons messenger or link with the Lords. Above all, he was acquiring knowledge and experience."¹⁷ It was through the military that Cromwell became known, as politically he was just a bench-warmer this early. The military arena offered Cromwell a chance to get noticed and rise in influence, and this chance he seized. With Cromwell's increasing success, he was placed into greater and greater positions until finally he became second in command of the New Model Army. It was shortly before this, however, that the main event in Cromwell's political rise took place.

¹⁷ J.C. Davis, *Oliver Cromwell* (Hodder Arnold, 2001), 140.

During Cromwell's rise to military stardom, he was embroiled in constant squabbles with upper-level Roundheads, most notably the Earl of Manchester. Throughout 1643 and 1644 there were many fights between them, each trying to get the other out of the way, for they both held decisively different views on how to run the country post-civil war. The victory at Marston Moor in 1644 only made this more of a problem, as Roundhead victory seemed distinctly possible, and here finally Cromwell changed his approach. In December of 1644, he backed down from his ardent position against Manchester and essentially dropped the public feud between them.¹⁸ However, this was merely the first step of his plan. The important step began when Cromwell started backing a proposal to remove all members of both Houses from command of the Roundhead armies.

This proposal, the Self-Denying Ordinance, was the most important moment in Oliver Cromwell's rise to power. At the time it had very practical reasons, namely that it would remove incompetents such as the Earls of Essex and Manchester and other thorns in Cromwell's, and the Roundheads' sides. This would let the Roundhead armies perform far better in the field and bring a swifter end to the war. Cromwell himself was included in this proposal; it is only through luck, necessity, or extreme subtle manipulation that Parliament voted that Cromwell keep his command. Unfortunately, as Gaunt says, "There is now no way of knowing whether the exemption was unforeseen, saving a military career which Cromwell himself believed would end in spring 1645, or whether from the outset he hoped and expected to win such exemption."¹⁹ Had this exemption not happened, Cromwell's career might have never risen above a notable MP

¹⁸ Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 56-9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

or army officer, and he certainly would not have had the opportunities to get the strong military backing and political position that he needed in order to become Lord Protector.

In the short term, the Self-Denying Ordinance ensured a quick end to the war by the reformed army led by qualified commanders. In the long run, it gave Cromwell the unique dual-role of being in Parliament while holding a key position in the army. This meant that when the army became too strong for Parliament to control, Cromwell was in the best position possible. While it is uncertain how much control Cromwell had over his own position being kept, it is clear that Cromwell had found and supported an excellent idea to improve the Roundhead side overall. Cromwell had shown a rather poor ability in his dealings with Manchester in the previous years, for his squabbles accomplished nothing and just increased resentment towards himself. However, his different approach in sponsoring the Self-Denying Ordinance was a skillful step that would at the very least get rid of his enemies in the army, and as it turns out, it gave Cromwell a unique path to the top.

After the First Civil War ended in 1646 there began a series of divisions between Parliament and the Army, and even within the army itself. Cromwell, having lost favor in Parliament and being away from the army for nearly a year after the war's end, was extremely unhappy with this, complaining to Fairfax in 1646, "We are full of faction and worse."²⁰ On one hand, Parliament was afraid of the power that the army had gotten and wanted to disband it quietly or ship it off to Ireland to halt the rebellion there. This included ignoring the considerable back pay that Parliament owed the army and did not

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

allow for any compensation to widows or crippled veterans.²¹ Naturally, the soldiers were indignant about this injustice. During this time a group called the Levellers, a radical faction that wished to drastically reform society, took advantage of the discontent in the army to press forward with their aims. Thus, Cromwell, along with the three other MPs who had influence in the army, were dispatched to the army camp in Saffron Walden in Spring of 1647 to try to quiet down the soldiers. This made Cromwell the key liaison between army and Parliament, and this would give him a unique avenue to power that nobody else could match.

During this time relations between Parliament and the army steadily grew worse, even though Cromwell seemingly earnestly tried to repair them and prevent a split. However, Cromwell was completely unsuccessful in trying to stop the outbreak of further problems and in fact only made them worse. After spending three weeks with the army he returned to Parliament and reported that “the army ‘will without doubt disband’ if ordered so to do....”²² In hindsight we can see that Cromwell was completely wrong, for just around two weeks later the New Model Army refused to disband in open opposition to Parliament. This was reinforced by the Cornet Joyce’s seizure of Charles I and brought the King into the supervision of the army directly.²³ It is certainly possible that he was playing with forces too strong to control by himself; the goals of Parliament and the army were totally opposite and both sides were entrenched in their opinions. It is quite likely that even a much better diplomat would have failed to produce a happy

²¹ Christopher Hill, *God’s Englishman*, 85-6.

²² William Cortez Abbott, *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 1: 231 quoted in Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 50.

²³ Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 74-6.

settlement. Whatever the case, Cromwell failed miserably here and only made things worse.

The essential part of this was that Cromwell eventually turned towards the military and away from Parliament. It was during this time that general awareness was made of the power that the army had and the simple fact that unlike the King in peacetime, Parliament depended on the army to keep order. This first occurred when the various heads of the army called for Parliament to disband itself within a year in fall of 1647.²⁴ During the next year there were considerable efforts among many of the soldiers and possibly the more hot-headed officers to try to get the army to march on London and exercise its will upon the stubborn Long Parliament, all of which Cromwell was arguing against. This was clearly demonstrated first in Cromwell's three-hour-long speech, "Reflecting 'very favourably' upon the king and 'concluding that it was necessary to re-establish him as quickly as possible.'"²⁵ Thus, while it was not openly demonstrated, the Army clearly realized where the power lay, although Cromwell also realized that imposing things by force at this point was not going to work: "that great objection... will lie against us, that wee have gott thinges of the Parliament by force; and wee know what itt is to have that staine lie upon us. Thinges, though never soe good, obtain'd in that way, itt will exceedingly weaken the thinges, both to our selves and to all posteritie."²⁶ At least partially because of Cromwell, the army did not actively force its will upon Parliament until Pride's Purge in 1648. After that event it was the army that ensured things would work out to its will and after the campaigns of 1650-1651 these increasingly

²⁴ Ibid., 79.

²⁵ Wilbur Cortez Abbott. *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 1: 512 quoted in Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 78.

²⁶ Unknown source in Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 80.

became Cromwell's will. Before looking to the radical changes that the army carried out, a closer look at Cromwell's role and ability in these decisions is essential.

Cromwell was a key part of the Reading meetings on 16-17 July of 1647, and the Putney debates in late October were chaired by Cromwell himself. In both of these cases he tried to steer things down a moderate course against the heavy resistance of the army radicals.²⁷ In Reading, Cromwell argued that imposing the will of the army with force was a bad idea: "Really, Really, Have what you will have, that [which] you have by force I looke upon itt as nothing."²⁸ Gaunt further describes the success of Cromwell in blocking the proposals of the radicals: "Eventually, Cromwell and his colleagues carried the day. It was agreed that the agitators' specific demands should be put to Parliament and a speedy reply required, but that there should be no immediate march on London or any explicit threat of a military purge."²⁹

At Putney, Cromwell was overall chairman, and unlike at Reading he did not succeed in swaying the opinions of the army to his own. Cromwell encountered a great deal of opposition in these debates and his "suggestion [to not use violence against Parliament] fell on stony ground."³⁰ Although we do not have complete transcripts of these debates, in the detailed ones that we have Cromwell did not step in at important moments to back up Henry Ireton, and as the debates went on, the radical and Leveller views gained influence and weight.³¹ Having been rather unsuccessful by debate over these several days, Cromwell made a motion to end the discussion and finally succeeded

²⁷ Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 80-82.

²⁸ Unknown source in Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 81.

²⁹ Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 82.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 78-80.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 84-6.

to at least end the radical debate.³² According to Gaunt, “Cromwell appeared far more successful when deciding an issue by swift confrontation rather than prolonged discussion and negotiation aimed at a compromise, however much he may have preferred the latter course.”³³ Overall at Putney Cromwell was unable to swing the army to his view, but he was able to prevent any action being taken by the radical element. This is a mixed performance at best but not at the level one would expect from the future leader of England. Clearly Cromwell was not good enough at negotiation and politics to win that position just through that skill.

Cromwell’s position during these years of turmoil was as second-in-command of the army, which he had earned from his performance in the Civil War. He of course had also played a leading role in the negotiations between Parliament and the army in 1647, and this must have given him an even greater position, but he was still only one of many people with power and influence. His abilities displayed in this period were mixed but overall poor. He completely bungled the initial negotiations between Parliament and the army, assuring Parliament that they could disband the Army without trouble. Instead, the exact opposite happened and the strife between the two bodies only worsened. To his credit, Cromwell was able to keep the radicals from taking control over the army and managed to steer things down a middle-road and indecisive course for some time.³⁴

The execution of Charles I was a momentous occasion for Cromwell. Before 1649, there was a mix of people in positions of influence and power and Cromwell was merely one of them. As history clearly shows, Cromwell was skilled and audacious

³² Sir William Clark, *The Clarke Papers* (London: Camden Society, 1891-1901) 1: 411-12 referenced in Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 86.

³³ Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 86.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 78-80.

enough to pull off the execution of the King, a horrifying and drastic event for the people of the 17th century. Although he had the power of the army, the existence of most importantly the King but also the Long Parliament were significant roadblocks to Cromwell becoming the Lord Protector.³⁵ Pride's Purge of 1648 and the execution of the King in 1649 ensured that there would be a vacuum at the top of England and after Cromwell's resounding military success in 1650-51 he would be in an even better position to fill this vacuum.

Getting to the Top: 1649-1653

The period from the execution of the King to the beginning of the Protectorate was mixed with military campaigns and trying to sort out the various political problems. While Cromwell's wartime correspondence was quite large and gave ample knowledge of his activities, there is less information for the two years between Worcester and the Protectorate. After his thundering success in quelling the revolts in Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, Cromwell certainly occupied the total loyalty of the army and had a great deal of prestige and influence as the all-successful conquering hero.³⁶ But at the top still stood the Rump Parliament. According to Abbott,

Though he was easily the most influential member of the group of army 'grandees,' he was still nominally, if not actually, under the orders of Parliament. That body had by now become a close corporation with a strong sense of the vested interest of its members as the sole arbiters of the fate of the nation. Many of those members were unwilling to alter its position or its constituency, and still more unwilling to put an end to its existence.³⁷

³⁵ I am not trying to go down the uncertain road of claiming that this was an ambition of Cromwell's all along, but merely trying to understand the nature of Cromwell's rise to power.

³⁶ Wilbur Cortez Abbott, *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, 541.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 511-12.

Nevertheless, the Rump still slowly started to reorganize and establish the Commonwealth. However they were going agonizingly slow, far too slow for the army, on the all important issue of what form the new government would take.

Cromwell's power, influence, and ability show very clearly here in late 1652 in his efforts to calm down the army. The impatient army men were sick of the slowness of Parliament and wanted to force it to disband, while the members of Parliament merely wanted to hold enough elections to fill the depleted Rump to a standard sized Parliament and keep themselves in it. Nevertheless, according to the contemporary Ludlow, Cromwell was able to dissuade the army leaders from having a clause in its petition to Parliament that demanded that Parliament be dissolved at a certain date.³⁸ As before, Cromwell demonstrated the ability to restrain the most radical elements of the army and prevent them from taking action. Cromwell certainly had more than enough power in the army for in events like this one he could force things his way if need be even against the opposition of the army leaders. Overall, despite the opposition to him in Parliament, he was still in the closest position to the highest position of power, and what is more, there was nobody who could feasibly contend for that spot.³⁹ Cromwell was so in the thick of things at this point, especially with the Dutch war and the nation's glaring financial issues, that he even resigned his Chancellorship at Oxford.⁴⁰

The army's frustration with Parliament had only increased throughout 1652 and into 1653 after the Rump failed to create satisfactory conditions for a new

³⁸ Ibid., 574.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 50-1.

government.⁴¹ The large quantity of effort Cromwell was spending on both foreign and domestic problems shows how close to the position of leader of England he was, yet there was still much to go before the vacuum would be sufficiently large enough for him to take over. The Rump Parliament was the main obstacle in the way, and resentment towards it only grew over time. In spring of 1653 the situation, as Abbott describes it, was “a trial of strength between the Cromwellians and the anti-Cromwellians, between those who were determined to go on with the existing Parliament in some form and those who were equally determined to put an end to it.”⁴² Essentially, it was a battle between military rule and rule under the Commons, but in this case the military, and therefore Cromwell had all the power. The ability of Cromwell to exercise control over the army and effectively the nation was demonstrated clearly with the dissolution of the Rump Parliament.

On April 20th of 1653, Cromwell had enough of the indecisiveness of the Rump, and when it tried to pass a certain, unknown bill, moved to dissolve it. As the contemporary Ludlow records, “then walking up and down the House like a mad-man, and kicking the ground with his feet, he cried out, ‘You are not Parliament, I say you are not Parliament; I will put an end to your sitting; opened the doors, and Lieutenant-Colonel Worsley with two files of musqueteers entred the House....’”⁴³ This put the power of Cromwell and the army that he wielded right out in the open. The Commonwealth was effectively over at this point. However, there was still some time before the rule of one man would be accepted. Cromwell showed a sense of strong

⁴¹ Ibid., 604.

⁴² Ibid., 631.

⁴³ Ibid., 643.

decisiveness here, and while he did wait until the last minute to do dissolve the Rump, he was quick and thorough in his actions and did not face any major repercussions from this act.

The Barebone's Parliament, or the National Assembly, began on July 4th 1653, composed of 140 members chosen by the army and possibly by Cromwell himself. Cromwell declared in the opening speech that he was giving the Assembly "the supreme authority" as it was quite clear that he had the most power in England with his dissolution of the Rump.⁴⁴ Unfortunately for Cromwell's and other army leaders' hopes, the Barebones proved incapable of working together and instead became racked by division. Therefore, likely under great pressure, in December of 1653 the 140 members resigned and drafted the constitution of the Protectorate, placing Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector under the terms of the new constitution.⁴⁵ His ascension was complete.

So now we have a clear picture of Cromwell's rise to power. His military prestige and complete control of the army, which first arose from his position as second-in-command from the First Civil War but was greatly strengthened with his incredible performance in fighting the Scots and Irish in 1648 and 1650-51, was the key source of his power. He was able to further his influence over the army and over Parliament in his very important role in the negotiations between Parliament and the army following the end of the First Civil War. When the crisis came in 1652-3, Cromwell still had the backing of the army and was in the right position to seize the vacuum of power when everything else had been removed. In all of these key moments after his return from Scotland in 1651 Cromwell was able to effectively impose his will in ways he was unable

⁴⁴ Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 147.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 149-151.

to earlier, such as at Putney, and this is a huge factor for his relatively smooth rise after Worcester. From this I agree with Peter Gaunt that Cromwell was at his political best when he imposed his solutions by force rather than by discussion and compromise.⁴⁶ Many of the times when Cromwell tried to work things out by discussing the matter with both parties or even trying to convert one side to his views he failed miserably. This produced disasters such as the army's open rebellion in the face of Parliament and the radicals of the Army continuing to gain strength.

Modern scholarship is of relatively the same overall opinion about Oliver Cromwell. He was not a remarkable politician but a good military leader. However, in the area of military affairs I feel that they fail to give Cromwell full recognition of his ability, even though they certainly praise him in many ways. According to Peter Gaunt,

These skills were bolstered both by attention to details of pay and supply – seen most clearly in the long, painstaking preparations for the Irish campaign – and by a conviction that the war was necessary and just and that, whatever may then follow in political and constitutional affairs, it was vital to score a complete military victory. In many ways, Cromwell was the most successful military commander of the civil war, and his reputation was built upon solid and often outstanding achievements.⁴⁷

J.C Davis is of a similar opinion, saying,

Cromwell's ability to learn 'on the job' and to become an outstanding military leader who distinguished himself in all aspects of contemporary military life, is dramatic and a key element in his reputation for greatness.⁴⁸

Christopher Hill is the least positive, for he merely says this about Dunbar:

As in Ireland, Cromwell looked meticulously after his supply. The fleet was used to ship provisions via Newcastle and Dunbar. Despatches flew back to the Council of State, demanding clothing, medical stores... When the Scots were routed at Dunbar on 3 September, this was the only major engagement in which Cromwell had not enjoyed

⁴⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 228.

⁴⁸ J.C. Davis, *Oliver Cromwell*, 111.

numerical superiority. But in every other respect – discipline, morale, equipment – his force was far superior.⁴⁹

Gaunt and Davis are quite positive about Cromwell's ability overall, while Hill almost ignores it. Hill downplays Cromwell's victory at Dunbar by emphasizing the poor quality of the Scottish army. However, he fails to note that Cromwell was up against a veteran commander in David Leslie, someone who was skilled enough to starve Cromwell into a retreat and then block his way of retreat. The main problem for all of them is the sheer lack of commentary on Cromwell's outstanding military deeds. This is shown in the failure to point out just how brilliant his strategic plans at Preston and Worcester were, and how he was able to seize complete victory from near defeat at Dunbar. The sheer difficulty in effectively manipulating his enemy, who was in a great position in 1651, to committing to a suicidal march on England which ended in predictable disaster at Worcester was not really mentioned by any of the authors. They merely describe the course of events, such as Hill saying,

He lured the Scottish Army away from its fastness at Stirling to an invasion of England which was now hopeless. Cromwell followed at leisure and Parliamentary forces converged on the invaders from all over England.⁵⁰

Saying something as little as that is not sufficient for describing such a high level of ability displayed to surpass a very difficult obstacle. Overall, the military arena is mostly glossed over, with Gaunt and Davis praising Cromwell's ability, but failing to show just how good it was. Hill did not even do that minimum, his attention to military affairs was almost non-existent and very brief when covered. The authors instead devote much more of their attention to political and religious matters.

⁴⁹ Christopher Hill, *God's Englishmen*, 125.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

In the arena of politics the modern authors do not think particularly highly of Cromwell overall. Gaunt was particularly harsh of Cromwell's performance in the Putney debates, where he says multiple times that "Cromwell's chairmanship... was again rather poor" and that "it was not an impressive performance."⁵¹ However, Gaunt's harshest criticism of Cromwell is about his abilities overall, where he says:

But Cromwell does not come across as a great intellectual or a highly original thinker, and there is little sign that he had an unusually wide or deep academic knowledge. In presenting a set of financial accounts to Parliament in April 1657, he claimed that the business was 'exceeding past my understanding, for I have as little skill in Arithmetic as I have in the Law'; earlier in the same speech he had pleaded ignorance of legal terms and claimed that, although he had heard talk of 'demurrers', such matters were beyond his understanding.⁵²

Christopher Hill feels similarly: "Few politicians can have been so innocent of political theory as Oliver Cromwell."⁵³ Hill also notes Cromwell's common vacillation: "What probably is true is that Oliver, as so often in moments of crisis, waited on events until he felt that inaction was no longer possible."⁵⁴

J.C Davis describes Cromwell's problem of relying on force even in politics:

Nothing constructive endured. Oliver's success as a destructive force and his dependence on the military stood in the way. Having, however reluctantly, played a key role in the dismantling of the ancient constitution, he proved incapable of establishing a new state on a stable basis....⁵⁵

Overall I agree with them on this lack of faith in Cromwell's political abilities; he was simply unable to mediate things between Parliament and the army and he only made the issue worse. Furthermore, the modern authors assert that he was generally unsuccessful when trying to solve matters through discussion, and part of this was his

⁵¹ Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell*, 85-6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 226.

⁵³ Christopher Hill, *God's Englishmen*, 203.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁵ J.C. Davis, *Oliver Cromwell*, 162.

hesitation, as Hill says, in moments of crisis.⁵⁶ I agree with Davis and Gaunt that Cromwell was able to achieve his ends best when he pushed his way by force, such as at the end of Putney or the dissolution of the Rump, and that he failed often when he tried to discuss matters civilly like at Putney or negotiating between Parliament and the army.

So what were the precise causes that a man, who while talented was not brilliant nor wholly successful outside of military affairs, could rise to the very top of England? Firstly, the animosity between Parliament and the army following the First Civil War cannot be understated. If the Rump or even the Barebones had been able to stay on the same course as the Army, Cromwell would have had no justification for removing them and with them at the top there was no room for the rule of military dictatorship. Secondly, Cromwell's outstanding military success gave him the backing of the real source of power in England, the army, though it was partially the real source of power because he made it so, both in its original creation and its legacy from solidifying control in all of Britain. Cromwell may have not been a Bismarck in politics, but he was a Marlborough in military affairs, and the backing of the army was far more important than a reputation as a skilled politician in his time in order to become Lord Protector.

While Cromwell was able to prove not particularly adept at rule from 1653 to 1658 just as he had proved unable to heal the problems between Parliament and the army and unable to create a lasting system of rule, his way to power was in the area he showed the most skill in, military affairs. He was also able to take advantage of the many opportunities that came his way, fulfilling his famous statement that "no one ever rises so

⁵⁶ See notes 46 and 55.

high as he who knows not whither he is going.”⁵⁷ Whatever his ambitions, the events did work heavily to his favor and because of his military experience he was in the right position to keep rising up. Because of both his way to power and his own ability at ruling, his death in 1658 led to a collapse of the current system and a restoration most unthinkable to anyone in 1649, a not too unforeseeable ending to a man of great military skill who achieved success through being forceful.

⁵⁷ Wilbur Cortez Abbott, *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, 655.