

English Civil War

Introduction

Next to the Reformation itself, this war was the most pivotal event in early modern English history. The war was a violent struggle for power between Parliament and the king that at first seemed to have been settled in favor of Parliament, but in the end created a constitutional monarchy.

In 1642 when both Parliament and King declared they had control of the army. When some members of the army chose to obey the king while others chose to obey Parliament, the civil war began. It ended in 1649 with the execution of Charles I by Parliament; which seemed to be a victory for Parliament. Yet, within a few years, Oliver Cromwell was dictator (he called himself the Lord Protector), and he ruled England for most of the 1650s. By the time he died, the English ruling class was ready to do almost anything to restore the monarchy, and Charles II returned to England in 1660. His return was nearly bloodless.

The conflict between king and Parliament has a very long history, going back almost to the beginnings of Parliament itself. For this essay, however, I choose to begin with a few words about James I.

Background to the Conflict

James VI of Scotland became James I of England. James was an autocratic king, a believer in divine right, and was innately suspicious of Parliament. He came from Scotland where he'd been overshadowed and, he felt, bullied. He came to England determined to be a true king.

He was well-educated and was at first well-received. Soon enough, however, he offended Parliament with his autocratic behavior. Parliament protested, but James usually mollified and temporized, and managed to avoid serious crises.

James' maneuvering merely delayed a confrontation. After he died in 1625, the members of Parliament were determined to assert their claims. But they met with a new king who was every bit as autocratic as the old one.

Charles I (1625-1649)

Charles managed to do just about everything wrong, even when it wasn't his fault. For example, his father arranged a marriage with a Spanish princess. Because she was both

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Spanish and Catholic, she was instantly despised by the Parliamentary party. Moreover, Charles began to rely increasingly on French advisors at court, worsening the situation.

Charles was a failure in war with Spain, his ministers were widely hated, and he was even more arrogant with Parliament than his father had been, scolding them in letters and ignoring their pleas. The Parliament he called in 1628 turned out to make so many claims that he ordered it adjourned. When the speaker of the House rose to announce the king's command, two members of Parliament forcibly held him down while others gave impassioned speeches and passed resolutions. When they were quite done, they adjourned themselves. Charles was so outraged by this behavior, he went eleven years before calling another Parliament.

All of these problems could have been resolved except for one final and crucial failure, the one sort of failure never allowed a king: he lost in war. In his battles with England's mortal enemy, Spain, Charles failed where good Queen Bess had so spectacularly succeeded. In 1639, the Scots rose in rebellion, too, and Charles finally had to turn to Parliament to raise money.

Religion and the Scottish Question

Much of the conflict between king and Parliament centered around religion. Charles was widely believed to favor Catholics, if not himself secretly one. Certainly his behavior toward Protestants in England lent credence to the rumors.

One of the chief issues concerned the Book of Common Prayer, a book of prayers recognized by the Anglican Church as the only one legal. The Puritans led the criticism of this level of state control over religious practice. Another sore point was access to public office, for only Anglicans were allowed to hold government office.

When Charles determined to force the Anglican prayer book on the fiercely Calvinist Scots, it sparked open rebellion. In 1639, rather than submit, the Scots formed an army and invaded England. Charles suddenly found that he could save his kingdom only by turning to Parliament. After eleven years, the new members of Parliament had a long list of grievances.

The Long Parliament

The parliament that was summoned in 1640 sat for thirteen years, becoming a power within the government in its own right. With the Scots occupying most of northern England, and with Ireland in full revolt as well, Charles had no choice but to agree to Parliament's demands. The political reforms went down smoothly enough, but when Parliament turned to religious reform, splits began to show clearly.

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On one side was the king and those who supported him--the Royalist party, also called the Cavaliers. On another side were the Independents, who wanted to do away with the Anglican Church altogether. Another group was the Presbyterians, who wanted to reform the Anglican Church along the lines of the Scottish national church. Both these were what we would call Puritans.

Also among the Puritans was an even more extreme group called the Levellers. They called for annual sessions of Parliaments, payment for members, and the right to vote for all householders; in short, an end to privilege based on birth.

Religion and politics were thus completely tangled together in England in the 1640s. By late 1641, many of the most pressing political reforms had been enacted by Parliament, and Charles may have had an opportunity to calm the situation. But Charles I was not the man for moderation.

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In March 1642 Charles, believing that Parliament had gone too far when it issued the Grand Remonstrance, moved to arrest John Pym and four other leaders. Charles himself entered Parliament with soldiers and a warrant, but Pym and the others were gone, having been tipped off in advance.

They fled to London where they were hidden by Puritan loyalists, who dominated the city government. The King demanded the return of Pym, but the citizens refused. London, at least, was in rebellion.

That summer Parliament, fearing military action, tried to seize control of the army by issuing orders for soldiers to report to Parliamentary, rather than royal, representatives. The King countered by ordering the bill ignored and raised his own army in August. Some turned out for the King, some for Parliament, and the war was on.

War with the King

Those loyal to Parliament were called Roundheads; those loyal to the king were Cavaliers. The Independents dominated the Parliamentary army. Royalist strength lay in the north and west; Roundhead strength was in the south and especially in London. Parliament was now free of the king and it passed numerous reforms, though Pym and the radicals want to go even further. The Presbyterians and royalist sympathizers still acted as a check against the extremists.

Battle of Edgehill: The first real battle between king and Parliament came in October 1642 at Edgehill. It was an inconclusive battle, but it showed both that Parliament was not strong enough to defeat the king, and that Charles was unable to take London.

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January 1643, Parliament sent out a delegation to negotiate peace, but Charles was feeling stronger and refused to talk. But there was a peace party within Parliament that was willing to compromise with the king in order to bring the civil war to an end. Both sides were seizing the estates of their enemies to finance the war effort, creating even more political chaos. The King gained several victories in 1643, which all the more inclined him not to negotiate or compromise with the rebels.

Marston Moor

In December 1643, John Pym died, but before he did he had struck a deal with the Scots. This was always Charles' great worry, that the rebels would ally with the Scots. So, just when he was feeling stronger, Charles found himself visited with a new calamity.

January 1644 the Scots invaded England again, 20,000 strong. A royalist army, led by Prince Rupert, went north to meet them and on 2 July 1644, the Battle of Marston Moor occurred. It was a day-long confrontation with only skirmishing for most of it.

Toward the end of the day, Oliver Cromwell led a cavalry charge that swept through the Cavaliers, around back, and then charged again into their flanks. Cromwell's charge brought a complete victory for the Roundheads.

York fell soon after, giving the Roundheads the two largest cities in the realm. Charles found himself very much on the run.

The New Model Army

Increasingly, the issue that faced Parliament was what to do with the king. The moderates did not want to bring the King to a final battle, fearing what it might mean. They wanted a negotiated settlement, not the death of their king.

The radicals wanted it all -- these were the Independents and Oliver Cromwell was emerging as their leader.

In 1644, Parliament passed Self-Denying Ordinance, intended to get soldiers out of Parliament, for the Roundhead army was largely officered by MPs. Cromwell was specifically exempted because everyone recognized he was the rebels' most effective general. All other MPs were to lay down their military commands and a new army was formed.

Parliament's army was now a national army, levied from all those areas under Roundhead control. It was a Puritan army, too, with Puritan preachers in every unit. Parliament had managed to get politics out of the army, but not religion.

Final Victory

The first test for the New Model Army came soon enough. At Naseby, 14 June 1645, Roundhead and Cavaliers again met. Again, Cromwell was victorious with his cavalry charge. The Roundheads had demonstrated superior discipline.

Naseby marks the real victory of Parliament. Charles ducked and ran for another year, but surrendered finally in May 1646, not to Parliament but to the Scots. The Scots, however, turned the king over to Parliament in February 1647.

Parliament had won its victory. The English king was now a captive. The question now was: what next?

The Army Takes Over

Parliament had won, but really it was the army that had won, and that army was deeply tied to radical religious movements all over England. The radical ministers within the army were agitating for even more change and stronger measures, and the soldiers had proved there really wasn't anyone in England with the strength to oppose them. Worse, Parliament was broke and couldn't pay the soldiers, giving them cause for grievances. Parliament was still being led by men of more moderate persuasion, or at least by men who sought some sort of settlement with the king. After long negotiation, in May 1647, Charles agreed in principle to accept both Presbyterianism and parliamentary control of the army for a limited number of years. In exchange, Parliament ordered the current army to disband.

The army refused. Oliver Cromwell took charge of the army and set a guard over Charles to prevent the King from further negotiating with Parliament behind the army's back. The captain guard on his own removed Charles in the night to Hampton Court, giving the radical army direct possession of the king.

Radical High Tide

Because of their attempts to negotiate secretly with the king, the Army in June demanded the arrest of 11 MPs (Members of Parliament). Parliament refused, and the Army marched on London.

The Independents in Parliament went over to the Army, which was now camped outside the city. At this juncture there occurred a vigorous discussion of what should be done. The Army was in the position of acting against both King and Parliament, and the real issue was whether the cause of reform justified such radical action.

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Putney Debates: The debates that now occurred, in the fields of Putney, developed in no formal order, but we have a number of accounts that let us know the the tenor of the discussion. The debates show us one of the first true popular debates over the nature of sovereignty, and the issues laid out here will be debated again in the American Revolution and the French Revolution.

The Levellers, the strongest of the radical groups, demanded an end to King, Lords and Commons, and rule by Parliament. The new Parliament would be elected annually, so that the voice of the people should not be silenced for too long, and election would be by manhood suffrage, poor and servants excepted. That is, the right to vote was to be extended to the working class of England. They demanded also reduction of tithes, abolition of restraint on trade, and liberty of conscience.

But other, smaller groups, went even further. Most notorious were the Diggers, who advocated the abolition of private property and an end to government. The rumblings from the Army were attacking the very bases of society.

Cromwell decided the whole business was becoming dangerous and ordered the Levellers back to their regiments. Some resisted and Cromwell himself attacked them, arresting three and executing one. With Cromwell's attack, the Putney Debates came to an end. There would be no apocalyptic reform in England.

But, having decided against the more radical elements in the Army, the question of what to do next, and especially what to do with the king became even more pressing. With his actions since Naseby, Cromwell had emerged as the real leader of Parliament.

The Adventures of Charles I

In November 1647, Charles escaped from Hampton Court. He fled to Isle of Wight where he opened negotiations with Parliament and with the Scots. The Stuarts came from Scotland, and Charles always believed he would receive better treatment at the hands of the Scots than of Parliament.

In January 1648, Cromwell, fed up with the king's behavior, denounced Charles to Parliament. More of the moderates left at this time, as it became clear that the sentiment was to depose the king in some manner. Parliament was increasingly dominated by the radicals, led by Oliver Cromwell and cronies.

Not all England supported the Puritans, of whatever stripe; many were still loyal to the king, believing the nation ought not be ruled by a Parliament. Royalist uprisings in Kent and Wales in April 1648, although put down quickly, show that Charles still had his supporters.

That summer, the Scots invaded again, but now it's Cromwell and Parliament, rather than the king, who fight and defeat them (in August 1648). Charles made the mistake of joining the Scottish army and was again captured.

Execution of the King

By December 1648 the Levellers dominated London, keeping the more moderate members away by force and threat of force. Parliament now consisted of only about 70 members, all Independents under Cromwell's leadership, trying to steer a course between King and presbyterians and Levellers.

This is the Parliament that finally brought the King to trial for treason. The trial began 20 January 1649 and took only a few days. Charles conducted himself with a calm dignity that impressed even his enemies.

He was convicted of treason by a vote of 26 to 20, for 24 members refused to vote. He was beheaded before a large but silent crowd on 30 January 1649. His stoicism and dignity, at his trial and at his execution, went far to repair public opinion of him.

So did England kill its king. It was the first time the public authority executed a king, either in England or anywhere else in Europe. It marks how far political thinking had advanced, and it marks how strong the non-noble classes had grown. It also showed yet again, as if anyone needed the demonstration, of how powerful a political force religion could be.

Oliver Cromwell

The undisputed leader of Parliament was Oliver Cromwell. He had been born in Huntingdon, East Anglia in 1599, while Elizabeth was still queen. His family had done well out of the Dissolution of monasteries, under Henry VIII, but Cromwell was not wealthy.

He first appeared in Parliament in 1627, but his early political career was unremarkable. He grew in influence when he sided with Henry Pym and became identified with those who opposed the king.

He was a plain-looking, plain-living man with an obstinate will and a genuine talent for command and battle. He came into his own through the army. He believed utterly that he was called by God to save England and Protestantism.

Rumblings

The Levellers were not appeased by the execution of Charles. Their program was aimed at levelling the edifice of authority, and they saw only that the titles had changed.

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"We were before ruled by King, Lords and Commons, now by a General, a Court Martial and House of Commons. And we pray you what is the difference?"

The radical wing of the movement was getting even more radical -- Fifth Monarchists and Diggers. These fomented more revolts and Cromwell ordered more executions. He acted so decisively that he pretty well broke the Levellers.

Foreign Affairs

August 1649-February 1650 Cromwell was in Ireland, battling the rebels there. He returned in 1650 to fight off yet another Scottish invasion, this one was led by Charles' son. Cromwell defeated this invasion decisively at Dunbar and took Edinburgh in December.

In August 1651 the Scots tried it again. Charles II led them again and Cromwell defeated them again, this time near Worcester on September 3. Charles fled to France. In 1652 war broke out with Holland. Cromwell won this one the following year. In the course of this war, the British navy was further expanded and developed.

Parliament and Cromwell

During these years, Cromwell found Parliament to be a contrary and difficult body, and he was as unhappy as Charles had been with it. But he also found himself every bit as dependent on it as Charles had been, for he too needed money for the wars.

He had already asked Parliament to disband and it had refused. In April 1653, Parliament proposed to expand its membership and to sit permanently.

Cromwell entered the House during the debate. He listened for a while, then rose to his feet and shouted:

"Come, come! I will put an end to your prating. You are no Parliament. I say you are no Parliament. I will put an end to your sitting."

Before the stunned MPs could recover, Cromwell had called his troops into the House and cleared it. Oliver Cromwell had seized power.

Parliament of the Saints

Cromwell tried once more, calling a new Parliament, known as the Parliament of Saints, or the Bare-bones Parliament. It was the most radical yet, though, and he dissolved it after six months of squabbling.

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Cromwell had adopted the title of Lord Protector of the Commonwealth. By April 1653 had moved into Whitehall, the former royal residence, with his family. He was effectively the dictator of England.

The Protectorate

Three parliaments were convened during the Protectorate and Cromwell had trouble with all three. In March 1657, moderates offered Cromwell the crown, but he refused it. He did, however, accept the right to name his successor. He named his son.

Cromwell's rule as Lord Protector was plagued with war. There were Royalist revolts, an especially serious one occurring in 1655. There was war with Spain in 1656, in addition to the earlier conflicts with Ireland, Scotland and Holland. The many wars left the treasury empty, making it difficult to accomplish much else.

Still, Cromwell did manage to hold at bay England's many enemies. he acquired Dunkirk and Jamaica as a result of his wars. The British Navy under Cromwell became a regular military service. And, of course, Puritans at last found a place in English government. Cromwell died 3 September 1658. His son succeeded him, but Richard Cromwell was not a strong ruler, and almost immediately the royalists began to work for a restoration of the Stuarts.

The Restoration

Richard Cromwell was unfit for rule. All his generals defected, and his support was gone within a year of his accession as Lord Protector. On the other hand, Charles II was tactful, clever, manipulative, patient, but completely determined to exercise royal rights. In 1660, backed by French money and Scottish cooperation, Charles landed in England with only a few hundred men. Every town went over to him; even Parliamentary armies went over to him. His march on London was more like a victory parade. Richard quickly abdicated and Charles was crowned king.

Cromwell's Protectorate had never been popular. England suffered it because there had been no one left to oppose the Army and the Army belonged to him. Once the general died, the traditional political forces quickly re-asserted themselves: king and Parliament.

Settlement

Very soon, Parliament was back in its former position. Charles was smart enough not to oppose Parliament openly. Instead, he manipulated individual members behind the scenes, buying them off with favors. He coddled and stroked and never allowed any disagreement to go too far.

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In exchange, Charles was able to ensure that English kings were firmly in power again, though a king could never again rule without Parliament. In 1688 James II tried to and he was run out of the country.

Even as England tolerated the Lord Protector, though the underlying question of the role of Parliament was unresolved, so it tolerated Charles. When James succeeded Charles, the old questions arose again. Once again a Stuart tried to rule without Parliament and once again there was rebellion.

The Glorious Revolution

The English call the rebellion of 1688 the Glorious Revolution because there was a major change of government effected without bloodshed. James fled England without a fight. Parliament called in William, the ruler of Holland, and made him king. With him came Mary, James' Protestant daughter and William's wife.

Parliament was now firmly in command of English politics. William agreed to religious toleration and to Parliament's claims to authority. In exchange, he got the title of king and the resources of England.

The Glorious Revolution marks the real end of the English Civil War because only in 1688, and not in 1660, were the issues raised by the war -- religious toleration and the role of Parliament -- finally settled.

Writers like John Locke lived and worked in this political environment, and it shaped their ideas. Their writings in turn profoundly affected the political thought of the American Revolutionaries of the 1770s.