

Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658)

An ardent Puritan, Oliver Cromwell was a member of England's Parliament who vociferously challenged the "Romish" practices of the Anglican Church and the policies of King Charles I. During the English Civil War, he was a notable leader of parliamentary forces and played a central role in the execution of the king. Later, Cromwell struggled to govern England first as leader of the Commonwealth and then of the Protectorate, a military dictatorship. What kind of government did Cromwell desire for England? How did he meet the challenges of leadership once he was head of government?

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Oliver Cromwell was born in Huntingdon on April 25, 1599, the son of parents of modest means. Though Oliver was distantly related to Thomas Cromwell, a figure of considerable power in the court of Henry VIII, little of the great man's influence remained to benefit the family by the seventeenth century. As a young man, Oliver was influenced by his tutor Thomas Beard, who was a committed Puritan. Cromwell went to study at the predominantly Puritan Sidney Sussex College at Cambridge in 1614, moving to London later to study law. As of August 1620, Cromwell had married Elizabeth Bourchier and returned to Huntingdon to manage the small family estate following his father's death. As an educated gentry man, he typified a class that was attracted to Puritanism and politics, and in the late 1620s, he held a seat in the House of Commons, where he attacked the continued "Popish" practices of the Anglican Church. His primary attention, however, was devoted to farming and he moved to the cathedral town of Ely in 1636 to work some recently inherited lands. Prosperity eluded him, however, and as late as 1643, he sought unsuccessfully to immigrate to Connecticut, one of the Puritan New England colonies.

By the 1640s, however, Cromwell had undergone a religious experience, which drove him towards a more radical religious posture and frequent denunciations of the established church. Puritanism, which had been suppressed during the eleven years of the "Era of Personal Rule," when Charles I governed without parliament, gained renewed political force in 1640

when the beleaguered monarch recalled parliament to cope with the threat of a Scottish invasion of northern England. Cromwell now sat as the MP (member of parliament) for the university town of Cambridge, a hotbed of religious and political controversy. As a member of what came to be known as the Long Parliament, Cromwell stood with the Puritan radicals, demanding the “root and branch” reform of the Anglican Church and the abolition of the bishops, who were seen as an unbiblical remnant of the Roman Church. He also sided with the political radicals, who challenged the “absolutism” of the Stuart monarchy and insisted on annual parliaments. In February 1642, when parliament proclaimed its authority over naval and military forces, Charles abandoned his capital for the north of England, and the English Civil War began to take shape.

By the summer of 1642, with England divided between supporters of the King’s cause and that of parliament, Cromwell was assigned to raise troops in the Huntingdon and Ely areas and soon was commissioned as a captain in the parliamentary army. In an army short of experienced professional soldiers, Cromwell rose rapidly in the ranks, being promoted to a captain of cavalry in 1643. A lieutenant general by 1644, he led parliamentary forces to victory over a royalist army at the Battle of Marston Moor, where he won for his regiment the name “Ironsides.” His most famous military role however, was as Lieutenant General of the New Model Army, where he served under Lord Thomas Fairfax. The New Model Army was an organization that reflected the revolutionary and egalitarian impulses unleashed by the civil war. Promotion came not from aristocratic heritage but from merit, and the troops were recruited as much for their ideological and religious fervor as for their military abilities. As Cromwell explained in a letter, “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.” The New Model Army also employed innovative tactics and strategies that were crucial to the defeat of the royal army at the Battle of Naseby in June 1645.

Military victory brought division among the parliamentarians, however, and the contentious debates led Cromwell to side with the army, which, unlike the Presbyterians, was supportive of religious toleration. At this juncture, Cromwell still favored a settlement with the king, as long as Charles would accept Cromwell's candidates as ministers and guarantee religious liberty for Protestants. Demonstrating a characteristic self-defeating duplicity that would later cost him his life, Charles chose this moment to flee to Scotland, where he gained a new alliance with his earlier antagonists. Consequently, Cromwell, the army and the vast majority of parliamentarians were convinced of the king's innate deceitfulness, and civil war was renewed in 1648. Cromwell further distinguished himself in this second phase of the war, suppressing a rebellion in South Wales, defeating the invading Scots at Preston and securing Yorkshire. 1649 brought new upheavals as parliament moved to realize the schemes of some of the more radical elements. In early January, the Commons, having already abolished the episcopacy, dissolved the House of Lords and the monarchy. Charles, having been returned to England by the Scots, was, at the insistence of Cromwell and the army, tried and executed for treason. The beheading of the king was, as Cromwell opined, "a cruel necessity." With England now a Commonwealth, Cromwell turned to the subjugation of Ireland and Scotland. Irish resistance was savagely crushed at the town of Drogheda, where Cromwell's forces massacred soldiers and civilians alike. The Puritan General, ever conscious of God's hand in temporal events, described the horrors at Drogheda as "a righteous judgment of God upon these." Scotland was subdued in similar fashion. He returned to London in 1651, where he turned his energies to finalizing the revolution.

The Rump Parliament, so-called because it had, over time, been periodically purged as it took on a more radical cast, now governed England. Support for this government steadily declined as its incompetence and apathy became evident. When the Rump introduced new measures to maintain the status quo by bringing in "persons of the same spirit and temper" to

increase the number of MPs, Cromwell and the army acted. Believing all the new revolutionary liberties to be at stake, Cromwell moved to wrest authority from parliament. Confronting the stunned MPs in April 1653, Cromwell informed them that God “was done with them” and that there must be “other instruments for carrying out his work.” In a final dramatic flourish, Cromwell dismissed the Rump: “You have been sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you! In the name of God, go!” Soldiers cleared the House at sword point and the road to a Cromwellian dictatorship was opened.

Now relieved of the troublesome Rump Parliament, Cromwell set about laying the foundations for a truly godly government, one designed by the Puritan “saints” themselves to reflect a Biblical model of government. In July, a parliament of 144 Puritan divines, selected by the army and Puritan congregations, was called to bring into being Cromwell’s pious vision. Remembered as the Barebones Parliament, after a member with the (surprisingly) not unusual Puritan name of Praise-God Barebones, the body failed to meet Cromwell’s expectations. Like their more secular colleagues in the Rump, the members of the Barebones Parliament haggled over trivia and wasted precious time, leading to their dismissal in December. In the long course of the civil war and subsequent revolution, as the House of Lords and the monarchy were disestablished, the traditional constitutional structure of the English government was gradually rendered almost unrecognizable. There were now few alternatives left, and for Cromwell, the obvious expedient was military rule.

Compelled to establish a government with some arguably credible claim to legitimacy, army chiefs drew up the Instrument of Government, installing Cromwell as head of state with the title Lord Protector of the Commonwealth. Executive authority rested with a Council of State and legislative power in a single house comprised of “God-fearing men,” meaning Puritans. This arrangement lasted less than two years, at which point Cromwell chose to rule on his own, essentially a military dictator backed by the power of the army. Through the 1650s, his

new government drew little popular support, in part because the populace resented the activities of government agents who enforced Puritan law. Though Cromwell gave thought to having himself crowned as king, he abandoned the idea. The fundamental reality was that Cromwell, as chief of state, lacked the divine sanction of a monarch and any constitutional basis for his rule. While he promoted freedom of worship with only a few exceptions, and sincerely sought to create what he defined as a godly commonwealth, Cromwell proved willing to silence or suppress those who challenged his vision. The arbitrary nature of his rule may have been behind an effort in 1657 by some of his supporters to convince him to accept a crown. As monarch, Cromwell would be restrained by traditional rules and precedents. The Lord Protector refused this suggestion however and died with most of his powers unrestricted in September 1658.

Though Cromwell's son Richard sought to extend the life of the regime by succeeding his father, the army had little allegiance to him and the growing unworkability of the Protectorate compelled a change. In 1660, the Long Parliament was recalled to London to oversee the restoration of the Stuart monarchy. With Charles II on the throne, the rebels and revolutionaries of previous decades were discredited and, in some cases, marked men. Cromwell's body was disinterred and hanged, the treatment traditionally accorded traitors and rebels. For some years, his decomposing head was publicly displayed in London in a pole mounted above Westminster Hall, his body buried at the foot of a nearby gallows. The treatment accorded Cromwell's body prefigured the contentious debates that followed him into later centuries. The subject of considerable historical controversy even now, and especially in England, Cromwell is sometimes hailed as an advocate of religious liberty, but more often denounced as a religious fanatic who participated in the dismantling of England's constitutional structure, a development that led inexorably to dictatorship.

Suggested Readings

Frasier, Antonia. *Cromwell: Our Chief of Men* (1973).

Hill, Christopher. *God's Englishman* (1970).