



UNIT 4

Oliver Cromwell and the English Civil War

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The seventeenth century in England was a period of religious and political upheaval and experimentation. The events of this century established, once and for all, that England was going to be a constitutional or limited monarchy and that the official religion of the realm was that of the Anglican Church. Instrumental in the events from approximately 1640 to 1658 was Oliver Cromwell, a Puritan landowner who rose to prominence due to his abilities as a military commander.

When Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, the crown passed to James VI of Scotland, who became King James I of England. England had a long tradition of parliamentary rule dating back to the Magna Carta of 1215, but James believed in the Divine Right of Kings. According to this theory, the king's power was absolute and unquestionable. His belief put James at odds with Parliament. Moreover, many elected members of Parliament were Puritans who were opposed to the Anglican Church, of which the king was the head. Monetary problems also plagued the monarchy, and any new taxes had to be approved by Parliament.

Upon James's death, his son Charles became king. Charles inherited his father's views as well as his problems. Charles I and Parliament were almost immediately opposed; Charles even attempted to rule without Parliament from 1629 to 1640. During this time, he trespassed upon the rights of his subjects each year to find funds without having to resort to

calling Parliament. A war with the Scots, however, caused by Charles's insistence on the use of the Anglican prayer book in that country, finally forced the king to call Parliament.

Parliament, under the control of the Puritans, forced reforms upon Charles before granting him any funds, most notably the Petition of Right. The king responded by attempting to arrest the Puritan leaders for treason. Just when it looked as if the Puritans had gained the upper hand, a party arose to support the king, fearing that the Puritans were going to abolish the primacy of the Anglican Church. A civil war broke out in 1642 between the supporters of the king and the supporters of Parliament. At first, the parliamentary forces were defeated. However, Oliver Cromwell formed a new cavalry regiment, known as the New Model Army, which was able to defeat the king in 1646.

In the chaos of the civil war, when the population of England was divided into many factions, the army came to be the supreme power. Parliament tried to govern, but Cromwell purged it of those elements who did not support the army, reducing Parliament to a "rump." This Rump Parliament put King Charles on trial for treason, found him guilty, and ordered his execution. England became a commonwealth to be ruled solely by Parliament, and Cromwell went off to subdue the Scots and the Irish.

The Rump Parliament proved incapable of governing. Cromwell eventually chased them out and ended their rule in 1653. The

army called for a new Parliament, which was to be made up of "Puritan saints," but this group exhibited just as much incompetence as the Rump. Other Parliaments followed, but there was so much controversy that Cromwell, taking the title Lord Protector, virtually ruled England as a military dictatorship.

Although the majority of English citizens were Anglican, the Puritan minority in control forced their religious beliefs upon the nation.

They outlawed dancing, sporting events, music (except for hymns), and even Christmas. Upon Cromwell's death in 1658 from malaria, the Commonwealth faltered, and the monarchy was restored in 1660. This great experiment in governing without a monarch had been a failure, yet England learned that having a constitutional monarch head the Anglican Church was preferable to a Puritan minority ruling through Parliament.

Critical-Reading Questions

Keep these questions in mind as you read the primary-source documents.

- Did King Charles abuse his authority as king of England? What evidence of abuse do you find in the documents?
- What are Charles's arguments against his trial? Do you feel that the trial of the king was legal?
- Why did Cromwell feel that he was forced to take control of Parliament?
- Did Cromwell's reign have any positive aspects and results?

Mock Trial

Here are the charges against Oliver Cromwell (the defendant): Oliver Cromwell is charged with the usurpation of the traditional government of England by first overthrowing the king, then taking control of Parliament.

DOCUMENTS

Document A

Charles I Invades Parliament to Arrest Five Puritan Leaders, 1642

(John Rushworth, *Historical Collections*. Vol. IV. London: 1691, pp. 447–478. As found in Elizabeth Kimball Kendall, ed., *Sourcebook of English History*. New York: Macmillan, 1900, pp. 237–240.)

. . . The said five accused Members this day *after dinner* came into the House. . . . They were no sooner sate in their places, but the House was informed . . . that his Majesty was coming with a Guard of Military Men, Commanders and Souldiers, to the House of Commons. . . . Whereupon a certain Member of the House having also private Intimation . . . that endeavours would be used this day to apprehend the five Members, the House required the five Members to depart the House forthwith, to the end to avoid Combustion in the House, if the said Souldiers should use Violence to pull any of them out. To which Command of the House, four of the said Members yielded ready Obedience, but Mr. *Stroud* was obstinate, till Sir *Walter Earle* (his ancient acquaintance) pulled him out by force, the King being at that time entering into the *New Pallace-yard*, in *Westminster*: And as his Majesty came through *Westminster Hall*, the Commanders, Reformadoes, &c. that attended him, made a Lane on both sides the Hall (through which his Majesty passed and came up the Stairs to the House of Commons) and stood before the Guard of Pentioners, and Halberteers, (who also attended the Kings Person,) and the door of the House of Commons being thrown open, his Majesty entered the House, and as he passed up towards *the Chair* he cast his eye on the Right-hand near the Bar of the House, where Mr. *Pym* used to sit, but his Majesty not seeing him there (knowing him well) went up to the Chair, and said, "By your leave, (Mr. Speaker) I must borrow your Chair a little," whereupon the Speaker came out of the Chair, and his Majesty stepped up into it, after he had stood in the Chair a while, casting his Eye upon the Members as they stood up *uncovered*, but could not discern any of the five Members to be there, nor indeed were they easie to be discerned (had they been there) among so many bare Faces all standing up together.

Then his Majesty made this Speech,
"Gentlemen,

"I Am sorry for this occasion of coming unto you: Yesterday I sent a Serjeant at Arms upon a very Important occasion to apprehend some that by my command were accused of High Treason, whereunto I did expect Obedience and not a Message. And I must declare unto you here, that albeit, no King that ever was in *England*, shall be more careful of your Priviledges, to maintain them to the uttermost of his power then I shall be; yet you must know that in Cases of Treason, no person hath a priviledge. And therefore I am come to know if any of these persons that were accused are here: For I must tell you Gentlemen, that so long as these persons that I have accused (for no slight Crime but for Treason) are here, I cannot expect that this House will be in the Right way that I do heartily wish it; Therefore I am come to tell you that I must have them wheresoever I find them. Well since I see all the Birds are Flown, I do expect from you, that you shall send them unto me, as soon as they

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return hither. But I assure you, in the word of a King, I never did intend any Force, but shall proceed against them in a legal and fair way, for I never meant any other.

"And now since I see I cannot do what I came for, I think this no unfit occasion to repeat what I have said formerly, That whatsoever I have done in favour, and to the good of my Subjects, I do mean to maintain it.

"I will trouble you no more, but tell you I do expect as soon as they come to the House, you will send them to me; otherwise I must take my own Course to find them."

Document B

Pamphleteer of the Time Describes the Civil War

(As found in James Harvey Robinson, *Readings in European History*. Boston: Ginn, 1906, p. 357.)

The war went on with horrid rage in many places at one time; and the fire, when once kindled, cast forth, through every corner of the land, not only sparks but devouring flames; insomuch that the kingdom of England was divided into more seats of war than counties; nor has she more fields than skirmishes, nor cities than sieges; and almost all the palaces of lords, and other great houses, were turned everywhere into garrisons of war. They fought at once by sea and land; and through all England (who could but lament the miseries of his country!) sad spectacles were seen of plundering and firing villages; and the fields, otherwise waste and desolate, were rich only and terribly glorious in camps and armies.

Document C

Oliver Cromwell Justifies the Army's Attack on Parliament, c. 1648

(Excerpts from a letter to Colonel Hammond [Robin] in Thomas Carlyle, ed., *Letters and Speeches*. New York, 1847, pp. 108ff. As found in George L. Mosse et al., eds., *Europe in Review*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1957, pp. 74–75.)

... You say: "God hath appointed authorities among the nations, to which active or passive obedience is to be yielded. This resides in England in the Parliament. Therefore active or passive resistance," &c.

Authorities and powers are the ordinance of God. This or that species is of human institution, and limited, some with larger, others with stricter bands, each one according to its constitution. But I do not therefore think the Authorities may do *anything*, and yet such obedience be due. All agree that there are cases in which it is lawful to resist. If so, your ground fails, and so likewise the inference. Indeed, dear Robin, not to multiply words, the query is, Whether ours be such a case? This ingenuously is the true question.

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To this I shall say nothing, though I could say very much; but only desire thee to see what thou findest in thy own heart to two or three plain considerations: *First*, Whether *Salus Populi* [the good of the people] be a sound position? *Secondly*, Whether in the way in hand, really and before the Lord, before whom conscience has to stand, this be provided for; or if the whole fruit of the war is not like to be frustrated, and all most like to turn to what it was, and worse? And this, contrary to Engagements, explicit Covenants with those who ventured their lives upon those Covenants and Engagements, without whom perhaps, in equity, relaxation ought not to be? *Thirdly*, Whether this Army be not a lawful Power, called by God to oppose and fight against the King upon some stated grounds; and being in power to such ends, may not oppose one Name of Authority, for those ends, as well as another Name—since it was not the outward Authority summoning them that by its power made the quarrel lawful but the quarrel was lawful in itself? If so, it may be, acting will be justified *in foro humano* [before men]. But truly this kind of reasonings may be but fleshly either with or against: only it is good to try what truth may be in them. And the Lord teach us. . . .

We trust, the same Lord who hath framed our minds in our actings is with us in this also. And all contrary to a natural tendency, and to those comforts *our* hearts could wish to enjoy as well as others. And the difficulties probably to be encountered with, and the enemies:—not few; even all that is glorious in this world. Appearance of united names, titles and authorities “all against us”;—and yet not terrified “we”: only desiring to fear our great God, that we do nothing against His will. Truly, this is our condition.

And to conclude. We in this Northern Army were in a waiting posture; desiring to see what the Lord would lead us to. . . . Dear Robin, beware of men; look up to the Lord. Let Him be free to speak and command in thy heart. Take heed of the things I fear thou has reasoned thyself into; and thou shall be able through Him, without consulting flesh and blood, to do valiantly for Him and His people.

Document D

The Charge Against King Charles I at His Trial, December 1648

(From John Rushworth, *Historical Collections*, 1659.)

That said Charles Stuart, being admitted King of England, and therein trusted with a limited power to govern by and according to the laws of the land, and not otherwise; and by his trust, oath, and office, being obliged to use the power committed to him for the good and benefit of the people, and for the preservation of their rights and liberties; yet, nevertheless, out of a wicked design to erect and uphold in himself an unlimited and tyrannical power to rule according to his will, and to overthrow the rights and liberties of the people, yea, to take away and make void the foundations thereof, and of all redress and remedy of misgovernment, which by the fundamental constitutions of this kingdom were

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reserved on the people's behalf in the right and power of frequent and successive Parliaments, or national meetings in Council; he, the said Charles Stuart, for accomplishment of such his designs, and for the protecting of himself and his adherents in his and their wicked practices, to the same ends hath traitorously and maliciously levied war against the present Parliament, and the people therein represented, particularly upon or about the 30th day of June, in the year of our Lord 1642, at Beverley, in the County of York; and upon or about the 24th day of August in the same year, at the County of the Town of Nottingham, where and when he set up his standard of war; and also on or about the 23rd day of October in the same year, at Edgehill or Keynton-field, in the County of Warwick; and upon or about the 30th day of November in the same year, at Brentford, in the Country of Middlesex. . . . [there continues a list of dates and places where the king has levied war] At which several times and places, or most of them, and at many other places in this land, at several other times within the years aforementioned, and in the year of our Lord 1646, he, the said Charles Stuart, hath caused and procured many thousands of the free people of this nation to be slain; and by divisions, parities, and insurrections within this land, by invasions from foreign parts, endeavoured and procured by him, and by many other evil ways and means, he, the said Charles Stuart, hath not only maintained and carried on the said war both by land and sea, during the years beforementioned, but also hath renewed, or caused to be renewed, the said war against the Parliament and good people of this nation in this present year 1648. . . . By which cruel and unnatural wars, by him, the said Charles Stuart, levied, continued, and renewed as aforesaid, much innocent blood of the free people of this nation hath been spilt, many families have been undone, the public treasure wasted and exhausted, trade obstructed and miserably decayed, vast expense and damage to the nation incurred, and many parts of this laud spoiled, some of them even to desolation. . . .

All which wicked designs, wars, and evil practices of him, the said Charles Stuart, have been, and are carried on for the advancement and upholding of a personal interest of will, power, and pretended prerogative to himself and his family, against the public interest, common right, liberty, justice, and peace of the people of this nation, by and from whom he was entrusted as aforesaid.

By all which it appeareth that the said Charles Stuart hath been, and is the occasioner, author, and continuer of the said unnatural, cruel and bloody wars; and therein guilty of all the treasons, murders, rapines, burnings, spoils, desolations, damages and mischiefs to this nation, acted and committed in the said wars, or occasioned thereby.

Document E

The Speech of King Charles at His Trial, January 1649

(From <http://personal.pitnet.net/primarysources/charles.html>.)

I would know by what power I am called hither . . . I would know by what authority, I mean *lawful*; there are many unlawful authorities in the world; thieves and robbers by the high-ways . . . Remember, I am your King, your *lawful* King, and what sins you bring upon your heads, and the judgement of God upon this land. Think well upon it, I say, think well upon it, before you go further from one sin to a greater . . . I have a trust committed to me by God, by old and lawful descent, I will not betray it, to answer a new unlawful authority; therefore resolve me that, and you shall hear more of me.

I do stand more for the liberty of my people, than any here that come to be my pretended judges . . . I do not come here as submitting to the Court. I will stand as much for the privilege of the House of Commons, rightly understood, as any man here whatsoever: I see no House of Lords here, that may constitute a Parliament . . . Let me see a legal authority warranted by the Word of God, the Scriptures, or warranted by the constitutions of the Kingdom, and I will answer.

It is not a slight thing you are about. I am sworn to keep the peace, by that duty I owe to God and my country; and I will do it to the last breath of my body. And therefore ye shall do well to satisfy, first, God, and then the country, by what authority you do it. If you do it by an usurped authority, you cannot answer it; there is a God in Heaven, that will call you, and all that give you power, to account.

If it were only my own particular case, I would have satisfied myself with the protestation I made the last time I was here, against the legality of the Court, and that a King cannot be tried by any superior jurisdiction on earth: but it is not my case alone, it is the freedom and the liberty of the people of England; and do you pretend what you will, I stand more for their liberties. For if power without law, may make laws, may alter the fundamental laws of the Kingdom, I do not know what subject he is in England that can be sure of his life, or any thing that he calls his own.

I do not know the forms of law; I do know law and reason, though I am no lawyer professed; but I know as much law as any gentleman in England, and therefore, under favour, I do plead for the liberties of the people of England more than you do; and therefore if I should impose a belief upon any man without reasons given for it, it were unreasonable . . . The Commons of England was never a Court of Judicature; I would know how they came to be so.

It was the liberty, freedom, and laws of the subject that ever I took—defended myself with arms. I never took up arms against the people, but for the laws . . . For the charge, I value it not a rush. It is the liberty of the people of England that I stand for. For me to acknowledge a new Court that I never heard of before, I that am your King, that should be an example to all the people of England, for to uphold justice, to maintain the old laws, indeed I do not know how to do it.

This many-a-day all things have been taken away from me, but that that I call more

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dear to me than my life, which is my conscience, and my honour: and if I had a respect to my life more than the peace of the Kingdom, and the liberty of the subject, certainly I should have made a particular defence for my self; for by that at leastwise I might have delayed an ugly sentence, which I believe will pass upon me . . . Now, sir, I conceive that an hasty sentence once passed, may sooner be repented of than recalled: and truly, the self-same desire that I have for the peace of the Kingdom, and the liberty of the subject, more than my own particular ends, makes me now at least desire, before sentence be given, that I may be heard . . . before the Lords and Commons . . . If I cannot get this liberty, I do protest, that these fair shows of liberty and peace are pure shows and that you will not hear your King.

Document F

Oliver Cromwell Dismisses the Rump Parliament, 20 April, 1653

(From the DC Speech Archive at www.debata.f25.com/archive/cromwell.html.)

It is high time for me to put an end to your sitting in this place, which you have dishonored by your contempt of all virtue, and defiled by your practice of every vice; ye are a factious crew, and enemies to all good government; ye are a pack of mercenary wretches, and would like Esau sell your country for a mess of pottage, and like Judas betray your God for a few pieces of money; is there a single virtue now remaining amongst you? Is there one vice you do not possess? Ye have no more religion than my horse; gold is your God; which of you have not barter'd your conscience for bribes? Is there a man amongst you that has the least care for the good of the Commonwealth?

Ye sordid prostitutes have you not defil'd this sacred place, and turn'd the Lord's temple into a den of thieves, by your immoral principles and wicked practices? Ye are grown intolerably odious to the whole nation; you were deputed here by the people to get grievances redress'd, are yourselves become the greatest grievance. Your country therefore calls upon me to cleanse this Augean stable, by putting a final period to your iniquitous proceedings in this House; and which by God's help, and the strength he has given me, I am now come to do; I command ye therefore, upon the peril of your lives, to depart immediately out of this place; go, get you out! Make haste! Ye venal slaves be gone! So! Take away that shining bauble there, and lock up the doors. In the name of God, go!