

“That which you take by force I count as nothing” Was the English Revolution anything more than a military coup d’état?

This debate stems from two indications. Firstly, the ideology that taking by force should be counted as “nothing” as it results in loyalties wavering and the loss of the nation’s trust. This represents the view of the majority of the population during this time however it is also important to establish intent. This is the difference between that of a revolution to a mere coup d’état¹. In order to analyse this; we must venture into three distinct periods during the English revolution; from the nature of the English Civil war, the protectorate and finally the political circumstance that incited restoration.

With the uncompromising Charles refusing legal solutions; Parliament resorted to the Militia Ordinance which was to ignite the “mobilisation of force”². Despite this; it was far from “nothing” due to the overall support of highly populated areas such as London. This was presented as a reactionary force against imposed conformity towards monarchy and the only chance to gain autonomy from the old order³. In addition to this both Charles and Parliament represented political authority and so both could be held on counts of treason⁴. While Parliament was actively defying the king; Charles had long before lost the support of his people compared to parliament who was notably “committed to the legal process”⁵. This would give the conclusion that the English Revolution was more than a military d’état. It was our nations reach for societal freedom against a king who had made many, including Cromwell, suffer under back door taxes and extravagance⁶. Indeed, this gives evidence to the forceful nature of the revolution but it is portrayed as a tragic villain because Parliaments intent was to create a stable leadership as supported by the Self-Denying Ordinance⁷.

Although these origins acclaim honesty; with the formation of the New Model Army, a power struggle commenced, segregating Parliament and the lower orders. This ultimately caused obscurantism due to the liberated structure of the army. The greatest threat imposed being political independence for those within the army which led to the seizing of the king. Their intention being to enforce the Declaration of the Army and the importance of their rights⁸. This catalysed a series of coups between the Army and Presbyterians until the Putney Debates. The causation of such being to “satisfy all men” which implies that while technically the events prior were military coup d’états; they were not counted as “nothing” but taken into consideration. In addition, Cromwell was recognised as a figure

¹Cromwell is seen as a "reluctant dictator" as he inflicted force for noble reasons. *Sarah Horton, A.J.P Taylor, The reluctant dictator, Cannock.*

² *The Great council of Parliament and the first ordinances: The constitutional theory of the Civil War, Mendle, Micheal, 1992, Journal of British Studies, Cambridge University Press, volume 32 no. 2.*

³ presents the English Civil War as a forced stance against divine right and the oppressions of monarchy. *The English Revolution 1640, Hill, Christopher, 1940*

⁴ *Revolution or Rebellion?, Danagan Barbara, Ideals of Civil War in Seventeenth-century England, David Armitage, Boston, United States, 2009*

⁵ *The Militia Ordinance of 1642 and the 14th Century Great Statut of Praemunire, Spehar, Warren E., June 2016*

⁶ Oliver Cromwell was specifically hindered by ship money and later in the book it stresses the need to use force against Charles (pg.83,124), *Oliver Cromwell, Harrison, Fedrick, 1936, Endeavour Press Ltd. 2016 Edition, pg.36.*

⁷ The Self-Denying Ordinance being where all MP's had to sacrifice a role whether that was within the military or Parliament; it was a statement of honest intent.

⁸ On the 2nd of June, Cornet Joyce seized the king with 500 troops in order to negotiate the Declaration of the Army.

of reason as he likened the political instability in England to that of Switzerland stating: “one canton of the Swizz against another?”⁹. Overall it highlights how military coup d’états were emerging but in reality, were only minor protests in the face of losing recent liberation and not an alteration of the existing Parliament.

On the other hand, some argue that these events set the tone for the rest of the Revolution due to Prides Purge¹⁰ and the execution of the king. With one-hundred and ten MP’s dismissed and even more denouncing the trial of the king; it left fifty-nine MP’s to sign the death Warrant of Charles 1. Leaving what was to be labelled “the Rump”¹¹ to face allegations of regicide. Moreover; The Engagement imposed loyalty upon the people to the ‘elected’ Parliament¹². This would be a defining moment in the English Revolution because it is the first instance of a fully stated military coup d’état. The rump was a minority group that imposed their political initiatives on the nation “forcibly”¹³ and it turn altered the existing government. They also enforced loyalty onto a population who came to believe that Charles was a martyr. Ironically, it counted as “nothing” because this act was seen as “corrupt” and installed mistrust among Englishmen, including Cromwell, who later staged his own military coup in order to restore power to a more stable constitution. Their intent was simply a means to an end however not an appreciated one like that of General Monks’ restoration but one of desires¹⁴.

Cromwell continuously attempted to create a constitution for example the Nominated Assembly¹⁵ however it was not until the years of the Protectorate did the English Revolution see the fruits to their labour and in fact the nature of the revolution itself. Cromwell was often described as having “passion”¹⁶ for the cause. This ultimately influenced his goals of godly reformation yet he expressed a number of authoritarian characteristics. Through the Major Generals; Cromwell established high internal control which was often likened to a military dictatorship on morals. For example; the Major Generals shut down many leisure industries of the 17th century. Furthermore, Cromwell imposed an oath of loyalty in June 1657 and dismissed six MP’s for criticising him in February 1658. Both initiatives being favoured by the belated “Rump Parliament”. It could be inferred that Cromwell was acting with force on social and political aspects, leaving the loyalties of the nation to waver. In fact, the military coup d’état of the committee of safety that commenced once Cromwell had died clearly shows how the English Revolution did incite a stable constitution under Cromwell but failed to have a long-term impact on political structure. Cromwell and his associates relied on the army and contracted loyalty to sustain order and so ultimately failed. In short; it supports the statement “to that you take by force, I count as nothing”.

Although this is a strong case; we cannot deny Cromwell’s’ intentions as a revolutionist. Indeed, the English Revolution did fall short due to the involvement of the army. The army influenced the “violent

⁹ *Puritanism and Liberty being the Army Debates (47-9), Clarke, Sir William, Clarke Manuscripts with supplementary documents, 1951, Edited by Woodhouse, A.S.P, University of Chicago Press.*

¹⁰ The army ranks were threatened of the fall of the Independents, so Colonel Pride arrested those without his political bias and another 250 "decided" not to come. This was on the 6th December 1648.

¹¹ "The Rump" was labelled as such by Clement Walker referring to the MP's as "corrupt...Maggots".

¹² January 1650, The Engagement required all men to swear "obedience" or face barring of public offices.

¹³ *The English Revolution 1640, Hill, Christopher, 1940, Lawrence and Wishhart.*

¹⁴ *Oliver Cromwell, Harrison, Fedrick, 1936, Endeavour Press Ltd, 2016.pg.77, pg.124*

¹⁵ April-December 1653, Cromwell appointed one-hundred and forty MP's to run the country but soon took responsibility himself with the threat of the radical 5th monarchists.

¹⁶ *Oliver Cromwell, Harrison, Fedrick, 1936, Endeavour Press Ltd 2016*

revolution” that unfortunately trailed into forced occupation. However, this is without the deterrence of respect. In the words of Woodhouse: “freedom is the man that will turn the world upside down” and true freedom lies within the “community”¹⁷. Cromwell certainly did turn the feudal system upside down and was a part of four decades of political protest. During this period the army became one of merit and not stature, religion became one of exploration and not requirement and our country became one of curiosities rather than obedience. Although the English Revolution was a military coup d’état; it still holds relevance today as a statement of protest against irresponsible authority and frankly the power of the people.

¹⁷ *The English Revolution 1640*, Hill, Christopher, 1940, Lawrence and Wishar,