

“To what extent was Oliver Cromwell responsible for Parliament’s victory in the First Civil War?”

Cromwell’s precise influence on the Parliamentary victory in the First Civil War is difficult to ascertain. As characterised by the Cromwell Association, he was a man of dual character, a politician and a soldier.¹ His impact on the events of 1642-46 were thus felt both on the battlefield as a burgeoning lieutenant-general and within the House of Commons as a leading MP. We might then swiftly conclude that his contributions ensured the outcome of the First Civil War as a decisive parliamentary victory. However, Cromwell’s lack of influence must too be considered. After all, many decisions leading to Parliament’s success were only taken by him in part, or without him entirely. The approach of this essay to tackle a question of such a challenging nature will therefore be to consider both Cromwell’s military and political influence (and lack thereof) on the First Civil War.

It has often been asserted that Cromwell’s authority even as a political leader, lay primarily on his military ability. Woolrych, for example, suggested that had he not been an army general, Cromwell would never have become Lord Protector.² It is thus of great importance that we consider his military role during the Main Civil War. His rapid ascent from a cavalry-colonel to second-in-command of the New Model Army certainly supports the claim that Cromwell had some hand in the result of the First Civil War. So too does his involvement with some of the most critical battles of the period.

Though the confrontations at Marston Moor and Naseby may be the first to come to mind, the Battle of Winceby was perhaps one of Cromwell’s greatest victories, despite its smaller scale. Its outcome proved advantageous for Parliament and illustrates Cromwell’s role in the overall victory. Thus far, the royalist position had been strong, especially with the capture of Bristol, a great blow to Parliament. It was thus crucial that Lincolnshire be regained by parliamentarian forces and Hull, a vital seaport, be relieved. The forces met on 11 October 1643 and it was Cromwell’s tactical decision as a cavalry commander to lure the enemy into a more vulnerable position on flatter ground. Fighting ensued and despite having his horse shot beneath him, Cromwell swiftly remounted, delivering a crushing victory alongside Fairfax, forcing royalist infantry and cavalry to flee.³ The result was that Hull was freed from siege, Lincolnshire taken into Parliamentarian hands and subsequently, the threat of the Earl of Newcastle’s army neutralised.⁴ Not only did Winceby serve as an example of Cromwell’s leadership and military ability, but also as a stepping-stone for Parliament’s future victories and hence, the outcome of the First Civil War.

By the time of Marston Moor, Cromwell had a far greater role to play in the army as lieutenant-general of the horse. As one of the most critical battles of the war and one which secured Parliament’s complete control of the north, Cromwell’s involvement is noteworthy and suggests a more significant contribution to Parliament’s victory. His division bore the brunt of Prince Rupert’s attack after suffering clashes with Byron’s regiment and despite Cromwell himself sustaining a neck

¹ “The Cromwell Association,” *The Cromwell Association*, N.d, <http://www.olivercromwell.org/wordpress/>.

² A. Woolrych, “The Cromwellian Protectorate: A Military Dictatorship?” *History* 75, no. 244 (1990): 207–31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24420972>.

³ “Winceby: The Finest Hour of the Rising Cromwell,” *Aspects of History*, (2021), <https://aspectsofhistory.com/winceby-the-finest-hour-of-the-rising-cromwell/>.

⁴ “English Heritage Battlefield Report: Winceby 1643,” *Historic England*, (1995): 3, <https://historicengland.org.uk/content/docs/listing/battlefields/winceby/>.

wound during the fighting, he (and Leslie's Covenanters) outflanked and defeated the cavalry.⁵ Later, Cromwell's confrontation with Goring's weary and outnumbered troops was also successful. With the support of Leslie and Crawford, Goring's men were driven back and eventually retreated to York (which later fell to Parliament).⁶ The battle, described by Cromwell as "an absolute victory obtained by God's blessing,"⁷ devastated the King's Northern army, and secured Parliament's control over the North.

Often regarded as the most important battle of the First Civil War, Naseby also involved Cromwell and thus supports the claim that he was at least partially responsible for the outcome of the war. As commander of the New Model Army, it was Cromwell who sent Okey's dragoons to Sulby Hedge to pressurise the Royalist flank into advancing prematurely. So too was it Cromwell's men who withstood and defeated Langdale's charge, despite suffering heavy casualties.⁸ The fortitude of Cromwell's men (not just in the Battle of Naseby) has often been attributed to Cromwell himself as an individual who arguably epitomised Parliament's ideals and as a leader who instilled within his regiments a sense of loyalty and godliness. The fortitude of his men consequently played a part on the battlefield in many of Parliament's victories, especially at Naseby. Having, defeated Langdale's cavalry, some of Cromwell's men shifted their assault to the Royalist infantry.⁹ Alongside Okey's dragoons and Ireton's regiments, Cromwell forced the Royalists into a retreat. For Parliament, their triumph opened the way to the west where the New Model Army would go on to capture Bristol and be victorious at Langport. Naseby is also often recognised as a battle from which Charles could not recover, with his resources depleted, it was unlikely that he would reconstruct another army, and it is at this point where most deem Charles to have lost the war.¹⁰

However, while Cromwell certainly played a large military role in many of the most decisive victories of the First Civil War, it must be acknowledged that other factors affected the outcome arguably more so than Cromwell himself. Generally, during the First Civil War, Cromwell held limited independent positions of power. Despite him rising up the ranks from a cavalry commander to lieutenant-general, he remained second-in-command or in cooperation with others. For example, in the aforementioned battles, Cromwell had assistance. At Winceby, he was joined by Fairfax, at Marston Moor by Leslie and Crawford and at Naseby by Okey, Ireton and Fairfax again. Although interacting with counterfactual history can be unwise, it is difficult to imagine that the outcome of the First Civil War would have remained the same without the cooperation of these commanders. Oftentimes, Cromwell's role was overshadowed by other military individuals who also contributed significantly to the outcome of the war.

Similarly, Cromwell's complete lack of engagement in some significant battles indicated that he was not entirely responsible for the outcome of the Civil War. Cromwell was not involved, for instance, in the First Battle of Newbury where Parliament obtained a significant victory which led to the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant. Subsequently, they gained an alliance with the extremely powerful Scottish army which proved to be a great Parliamentary advantage in future battles. Furthermore, the campaigns he was involved in were often geographically limited and despite his

⁵ J. Tincey, "Marston Moor 1644: The Beginning of the End," (2003): 64.

⁶ P. Young "Marston Moor 1644: The Campaign and the Battle," (1970): 121-125.

⁷ S.C. Lomas, (ed.), "The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell. With Elucidations by Thomas Carlyle", (3 vols 1904), I, 176.

⁸ "The Battle," *The Naseby Battlefield Project*, N.d. <https://www.naseby.com/project/the-battle/>.

⁹ K. Roberts, "Cromwell's War Machine: The New Model Army, 1645-1660," (2009): 209.

¹⁰ "Battle of Naseby," *National Army Museum*, N.d. <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/battle-naseby>.

performance in some, he was not involved in other, often crucial confrontations, such as the siege and survival of Gloucester. Some such as Wanklyn have even gone so far as to suggest that Cromwell hindered Parliamentary forces in some campaigns.¹¹

Cromwell's political role during the First Civil War is somewhat more overlooked. He played a role in many decisions during the First Civil War which advanced Parliament's position. Yet many decisions were also made without his input, and sometimes in opposition with his judgement.

Cromwell played a large role during the winter decisions of 1644-45 in the passing of the Self-denying Ordinance which benefited Parliament. Divisions had developed in Parliament between the Presbyterians who (broadly) sought a negotiated compromise with the king and Cromwell and the Independents who desired an outright military victory. The disputes that arose from these divisions were one of the causes of the passing of the Self-denying Ordinance.¹² The bill ultimately improved military function by separating Parliamentary disputes from the army itself. Significantly, it led to greater reform and the introduction of the New Model Army.

While the army until 1645 had been a combination of multiple armies including Cromwell's Eastern Association, deficiencies in its command and organisation had been apparent for some time, even before the passing of the Self-denying Ordinance.¹³ Thus, the New Model Army's character consisted of more organised and cohesive regiments. Like the Eastern Association, the New Model Army comprised fewer officers who had been promoted solely as a result of their social standing, unlike the Royalist army. Cromwell famously affirmed: "I would rather have a plain russet-coated captain that knows what he fights for and loves what he knows that that which you call a gentlemen and nothing else."¹⁴ Moreover, the Army's fearsome fighting reputation was testament to its successes and it is often considered one of Parliament's greatest assets which aided their victory in the Civil War. Cromwell's involvement in partially establishing it (and leading it as a cavalry commander) thus emphasises his political role in Parliament's triumph.

Despite these contributions, however, some key political decisions were made by other individuals, without Cromwell's influence. The previously mentioned Solemn League and Covenant gave Parliament a crucial advantage by introducing an external power to the battlefield. It was John Pym's negotiations with the Scottish that created the Solemn League and Covenant and subsequently, Parliament's alliance with them. This military union brought over 21,000 men under Leslie, Earl of Leven and allowed Parliamentarian forces to push back royalists in the north.¹⁵ It was thus Pym who was responsible for this advantage, rather than Cromwell. In fact, Cromwell was opposed to an alliance with the Scottish, and had attempted to strike out a clause which would purge army officers who would refuse the Solemn League and Covenant during the creation of the New Model Army.¹⁶

¹¹ M. Wanklyn, "Oliver Cromwell and the Performance of Parliament's Armies in the Newbury Campaign, 20 October–21 November 1644," *History* 96, no. 1 (321) (2011): 3–25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24429004>. Wanklyn suggested that Cromwell's decisions during the Second Battle of Newbury in 1644 were deliberately damaging to Parliamentary forces. He asserts that Cromwell's lack of flair in the campaign could have been created to further his political interests.

¹² R. Hutton, "The Making of Oliver Cromwell," (2022): 230.

¹³ M. Wanklyn, "CHOOSING OFFICERS FOR THE NEW MODEL ARMY, FEBRUARY TO APRIL 1645." *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 92, no. 370 (2014): 109–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44232556>.

¹⁴ S.C. Lomas, 154.

¹⁵ J.H. Ohlmeyer, "English Civil Wars," *Britannica*, N.d. <https://www.britannica.com/event/English-Civil-Wars>.

¹⁶ Hutton, 234.

As such, Cromwell was not involved with (and occasionally opposed) some of Parliament's key decisions which contributed to their victory.

It must also be acknowledged that the outcome of the First Civil War overall was not simply due to Parliamentary strengths, but also Royalist weakness which Cromwell often played no part in. Parliament's resources meant that they had a slight advantage over the royalists from the outset of the war. Their possession of more wealthy areas of the country provided them with some security, whilst their ability to raise loans as a result of their control over London was undoubtedly advantageous. Conversely, while Charles was able to collect some finances, from Oxford colleges for example, these resources were finite. His reluctance to tax the localities he controlled as Parliament did was also a factor in the Royalists' lack of resources and overall inferiority. The impact of neutralism also contributed to Parliament's victory without involving Cromwell. Clubmen in particular were often more hostile towards occupying Royalist troops, with some such as the Langport group actively assisting Parliamentarians.¹⁷ Similarly, the King's cessation of his alliance with the Catholic Irish in 1643 was certainly no fault of Cromwell's. Militarily, the royalists were repeatedly outnumbered, such as at Marston Moor and Naseby, often as a result of their poor organisation. As such, it is of great importance that we consider not only Cromwell's influence, but also the lack of his and Parliament's involvement at certain points where external factors contributed to the outcome more greatly than any one individual.

In conclusion, while it is undeniable that Cromwell played a significant part in the First Civil War, his role was limited. Despite his performances in the Battles of Marston Moor, Naseby and Winceby, and despite his political influence in passing bills such as the Self-denying Ordinance, his contributions were often overshadowed or shared by figures such as Fairfax, Manchester and Pym. Wider, external factors also had an influence on the outcome, and so too did Royalist weaknesses which Cromwell played little part in. Cromwell's legacy as Lord Protector may cloud our judgement on the extent to which he was responsible for Parliament's triumph, but it is important to recognise that the contributions of a single man could not win the war itself. The Parliamentary victory was a shared effort, and certainly not Cromwell's alone.

¹⁷ "Clubman Uprisings," *BCW Project*, N.d. <http://bcw-project.org/military/english-civil-war/clubman-uprisings>.