**The Cromwellian Protectorate**

**Graham Goodlad surveys the variety of interpretations offered by historians of Cromwellian rule in the 1650s.**

The last two decades have witnessed the growth of an abundant historical literature on the personality of Oliver Cromwell and his rule as Lord Protector. A series of biographies, including those by Barry Coward (1991), Peter Gaunt (1996), J.C. Davis (2001) and Martyn Bennett (2006), has appeared. These have been supplemented by a host of articles and specialised studies, covering different aspects of the Interregnum. It is understandable that students may feel daunted by the volume of published research on this fascinating but difficult period of history. This article aims to pick a path through some of the leading interpretations on offer. Its main focus is the impact of the Cromwellian regime upon England and Wales, although it should not be forgotten that Scotland and Ireland have also received considerable attention from historians in recent years. The article explores three important and inter-related questions:

**·          Was the Protectorate a dictatorship?**

**·          Was the Protectorate evolving into a monarchical regime?**

**·          Was its downfall unavoidable?**

**A Dictatorial Regime?**

For many years the Protectorate was widely regarded as essentially a military dictatorship. The regime’s undeniable dependence on the support of the army, together with Oliver Cromwell’s inability to work with his Parliaments, provided superficial grounds for this view. It was comprehensively challenged by the historian Austin Woolrych, whose argument is conveniently summarised in the textbook Britain in Revolution. With a standing army of between 11,000 and 14,400, at a time when the population of England and Wales was approximately 5.5 million, the creation of a military dictatorship was a practical impossibility. Nor did the regime replace the justices of the peace, the unpaid magistrates who traditionally bore responsibility for local government. For most of the Protectorate, fewer than 90 of England’s 2,500 JPs were serving army officers. Admittedly the regime was capable of ruthless action, and not only against royalist conspirators who sought to overthrow it. A number of historians have cited the case of George Cony, a merchant who contested the Protectorate’s right to levy customs duties without parliamentary approval. In a clear breach of the rule of law, his defence lawyers were arrested. In general, however, by 17th-century standards the regime exercised restraint in punishing its opponents. There were few political prisoners, and only those who actually participated in rebellion or attempted assassination of the Protector suffered the death penalty. The use of torture, which had been employed under the early Stuarts, was not revived.

This interpretation is confirmed by Peter Gaunt’s study of the Council that was established to advise the Protector. Like Woolrych, Gaunt emphasises the restrictions placed on Cromwell by a written constitution, the Instrument of Government, which was superseded in 1657 by the Humble Petition and Advice. It is true that the Protector was granted formidable powers in relation to his Parliaments, which did not have to meet for more than a minimum of five months every three years. His powers included the right to veto legislation and to order a dissolution of Parliament after the set minimum period had elapsed. Control over the army and the Protector’s income were placed beyond the reach of the legislature. He was appointed for life and, under the terms of the Humble Petition, had the right to nominate his successor.

On the other hand, in a number of areas, including financial policy, Cromwell had to work in co-operation with the Protectoral Council. Unlike his royal predecessors, he did not have a free hand in making appointments to the Council. At several points, for example the decision to summon a second Parliament in 1656, he allowed the Council to deflect him from his preferred course of action. The Cromwell who emerges from this analysis was quite prepared to accept constitutional limitations on his freedom of action. Moreover, as Gaunt has argued elsewhere, Cromwell had a genuine belief in Parliament and sought, albeit unsuccessfully, to work with it. It is true that the two Protectorate Parliaments were purged and in the end abruptly dissolved, but they did not spend all their time in constitutional wrangles. Attempts were made to deal constructively with financial matters and to legislate on social and moral issues such as vagrancy and Lord’s day observation.

An important exception to this picture is the decision to divide England and Wales into regional commands under the authority of Major-Generals, supported by county committees and militias. This experiment, which lasted from the summer of 1655 to January 1657, was the closest that the Protectorate came to the introduction of a military despotism. It was unpopular with the county elites, not least because it was to be financed by the imposition of a punitive 10 per cent ‘decimation tax’ on royalist estates.

Christopher Durston’s detailed study confirms the success of the Major-Generals in giving the regime security and inhibiting the revival of royalist resistance after the failed Penruddock uprising of March 1655. In other respects, however, the episode was more remarkable for its lack of achievement. Charged with furthering the regime’s objective of ‘godly reformation’, the Major-Generals made only a limited and temporary impact with their campaigns against alehouses and popular pastimes of which radical puritans disapproved. In the relatively short period during which they were active, England’s army rulers made little impression on a well-established traditional festive culture. The Major-Generals lacked the requisite administrative machinery and never received consistent backing from London. They proved unable to collect adequate revenues and to prevent the election of a Parliament that was fundamentally unsympathetic to them. Cromwell’s failure to defend them against parliamentary attack sealed their fate and signalled a renewed effort by the regime, in its final phase, to win the acceptance of the traditional ruling classes.

If the regime cannot truly be described as a military dictatorship, this does not necessarily exclude an element of the dictatorial in its aspirations. Cromwell’s commitment to moral reform, and to the interests of the puritan minority that had won the Civil War, were constant themes of the Protectorate. As Blair Worden made clear in an important essay, ‘Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate’, the regime’s religious policies fell significantly short of comprehensive toleration. Rather, Cromwell offered liberty of conscience to a broad range of independent sects, whose members he sought to draw together in a united ‘godly party’. Anglicans, Catholics and some of the more radical Protestant groups were excluded from the embrace of official toleration. Cromwell’s attitude to the case of the Quaker, James Nayler, is instructive. Nayler was tried by Parliament and sentenced to imprisonment and savage mutilation for alleged blasphemy, after he rode into Bristol in imitation of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem. The Protector questioned Parliament’s constitutional right to act as judge and jury, yet he also explicitly condemned Nayler’s conduct.

The historian Jeffrey Collins took this discussion further in an article on ‘The Church Settlement of Oliver Cromwell’, published in the journal History in 2002. He examined the activities of two institutions established by the government in 1654, the ‘Triers’ and the ‘Ejectors’. The former was a national body whose role was to vet new appointments of clergy, whilst the latter were local committees charged with the removal of inadequate ministers. Collins demonstrated Cromwell’s strong personal involvement in the process; he made approximately 40 per cent of all the appointments on which the Triers deliberated. The Protectorate emerges from his work as intent on maintaining the power of the state in ecclesiastical affairs. Political loyalty was one of the criteria for confirmation or ejection from a parish living. It is possible to reconcile this interpretation with the emphasis placed by a number of historians, notably J.C. Davis, on Cromwell’s ‘providentialism’: the belief that God intervened directly in the lives of his people. The role of government was not to prescribe specific forms of worship but to provide a framework within which the godly could come together in a genuinely national church.

**Mutating into Monarchy?**

The need to confer legitimacy on the Protectorate - a kind of regime for which there was no precedent in English history - was a persistent concern for Cromwell. In his detailed study of the government, Roy Sherwood argues that it strove to achieve this objective by becoming increasingly monarchical in character. Sherwood draws attention to the growth of a ‘court’ whose ceremonial mirrored that of the Stuart kings. The royal palaces were granted to the Protector and his family and many of the titles of royal household officials were restored. Major public events, notably Cromwell’s second installation as Protector in June 1657, following his acceptance of the Humble Petition and Advice, created an impression of a ruler who was ‘king in all but name’. Cromwell’s funeral was consciously modelled on that of James I.

Cromwell’s attitude towards the crown has been a source of considerable historical controversy. By 1657 Parliament was ready to offer him this symbol of kingship. England’s traditional elites saw a return to monarchy as the best way of ensuring political stability. It was to be combined with the creation of a second house of Parliament to replace the House of Lords, which had been abolished in 1649. A number of historians have argued that Cromwell seriously intended to accept the crown but was deflected by the opposition of leading figures in the army, who regarded such a step as a betrayal of the cause for which they had waged the civil wars. His decision to continue as Protector signified the victory of the military, upon whose consent his rule ultimately depended.

This interpretation has been challenged in recent years. Laura Knoppers’ study, Constructing Cromwell, points to the variety of public representations of the Protector and demonstrates that these were not limited to the purely monarchical. She emphasises the contradiction between Cromwell’s unassuming personal style, captured in his last official portrait, and the designs of the regime’s image-makers, with which he had little to do. Other scholars have questioned the idea that Cromwell reluctantly abandoned the crown in deference to pressure from his army colleagues. Austin Woolrych suggests that he was quite prepared to face down the military when the need arose.

The starting point for this interpretation is a greater readiness to take Cromwell’s religious beliefs seriously. According to Blair Worden, Cromwell was convinced that the outcome of the civil wars indicated that God had condemned the notion of kingship. To return to it would incur the risk of divine disfavour. As Cromwell declared, ‘I would not seek to set up that that providence hath destroyed and laid in the dust, and I would not build Jericho again.’ Other, more practical reasons may have weighed with him. J.C. Davis’s study of Cromwell portrays him as a leader for whom state structures were always secondary to the building of networks - a web of familial, military, political and religious alliances. His overriding objective was to create consensus behind the idea of a firm government that would protect the ideals for which he had struggled. His actions in 1657 were directed towards winning the support of the conservative gentry, England’s ‘natural rulers’, whose co-operation at local level was vital for the stability of the regime.

**Bound to Fail?**

Most historians have stressed the importance of Cromwell’s personal qualities as an explanation for both the survival and the eventual collapse of the Protectorate. His unique ability to attract the loyalty of civilians and military men alike enabled him to hold his government together. After he died in September 1658, the Protectorate was doomed. According to Ronald Hutton, Cromwell failed to lay secure constitutional or financial foundations for the regime. Its leading personnel were united only by loyalty to him, and by the end he had no new ideas to offer. He brought his son, Richard, forward too late as a potential successor, launching him into political life without adequate preparation; he was not appointed to the Council until December 1657. Richard, derided in popular myth as ‘Tumble-Down Dick’, was personally popular but never grasped the centrality of the military in the dynamics of the Protectorate. He fell from office after barely nine months because he lacked his father’s credibility with the army, which he viewed as a rather irritating special interest group.

The degree to which the regime was able to win the support of the county elites remains hard to judge. The unpopularity of the Major-Generals’ rule is not in question, but there are some indications that the Protectorate was beginning to gain acceptance in the localities after this short-lived experiment was abandoned. Towards the end of the decade social contact was being resumed between county families who had fought on opposite sides in the civil war. Although there is little suggestion of positive support for the Protectorate, the Stuart dynasty did not arouse much enthusiasm in the late 1650s. For pragmatic local governors, whose priority was presumably the maintenance of social stability, a royal restoration would have entailed a disproportionate amount of conflict and upheaval. The return of Charles II only became practical politics after the fall of the Protectorate, as its successors seemed unable to guarantee order. Austin Woolrych has argued that the Humble Petition and Advice provided a workable constitution, with the potential to strike a balance between the two extremes of personal autocracy and unfettered parliamentary sovereignty. Had the settlement been given more time to bed down under a firm ruler, it might have succeeded. Instead, in the spring of 1659, it was destroyed by a coalition of militant army officers and republicans who represented a minority of the population, and who had no constructive alternative to offer.

This generally positive assessment is supported by Barry Coward’s study of The Cromwellian Protectorate. He credits Cromwell with good political judgement in his response to the Humble Petition and Advice. According to Coward, this enabled him to keep alive the hope of a ‘healing’ settlement, by avoiding complete identification with either the military or the civilian wing of the political establishment. He rejects the view that in the last year of his life, with his energy sapped by ill health, Cromwell was sliding into a sterile, reactive conservatism. In particular, he argues that the 1650s marked a crucial phase in the creation of what some historians have termed the ‘fiscal-military state’, capable of raising revenue to support an assertive international role. By 1658 major blows had been struck against the national enemy, Spain, and the country had been made secure against both foreign invasion and royalist conspiracy.

Nonetheless, in spite of this positive gloss on events, Coward does not seek to deny the three key factors which undermined the Protectorate: the inexperience of Richard Cromwell; the tension between military and civilian components of the Cromwellian alliance; and the regime’s failure to overcome its severe financial problems. It has been estimated that, shortly before Cromwell’s death, its debts stood at approximately £1.5 million. In large part this was a consequence of the heavy cost of the armed forces, which the government proved unable to reduce in size. The regime’s military commitments were taking it to the verge of bankruptcy, just when it seemed to be devising a feasible civilian basis for its rule. The Protectorate desperately needed time in which to consolidate the partial success that had been achieved, and this was to be denied.

**Further reading**

Martyn Bennett, Cromwell (Routledge, 2006)

Barry Coward, The Cromwellian Protectorate (Manchester University Press, 2002)

J.C. Davis, Oliver Cromwell (Arnold, 2001)

Christopher Durston, Cromwell’s Major-Generals: Godly Government during the English Revolution (Manchester University Press, 2001)

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John Morrill (ed.), Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution (Longman, 1990)

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Roy Sherwood, Oliver Cromwell: King in all but name (Sutton, 1997)

David L. Smith (ed.), Cromwell and the Interregnum (Blackwell Essential Readings in History, 2003)

Austin Woolrych, Britain in Revolution, 1625-1660 (Oxford University Press, 2002)

Blair Worden, ‘Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate’ in W.J. Sheils (ed.), Persecution and Toleration Studies in Church History, 21 (Oxford University Press, 1984)

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| **Timeline** |  | |
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| 1653 December | | Instrument of Government: Cromwell appointed Lord Protector |
| 1654 September | | First Protectorate Parliament (to January 1655) |
| 1655 March | | Failure of Penruddock’s rising in south-west England |
| August | | Major-Generals’ rule established in England and Wales |
| 1656 September | | Second Protectorate Parliament: first sitting until June 1657 |
| December | | Parliamentary debate on case of the Quaker, James Nayler |
| 1657 January | | End of Major-Generals’ rule |
| May | | Cromwell declines Crown but accepts revised constitution in the Humble Petition and Advice |
| 1658 Jan-Feb | | Second sitting of second Protectorate Parliament |
| September | | Death of Cromwell; Richard Cromwell Lord Protector |
| 1659  May | | Resignation of Richard Cromwell |
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**Issues to debate**

o Why did Oliver Cromwell fail to achieve a lasting settlement?

o How much popular support was there for the Protectorate?

o Was the legacy of the Protectorate wholly barren?

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