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**Offering the Crown to Cromwell**

**King Oliver? Patrick Little asks why Parliament offered the infamous regicide the crown of England, to what extent he was tempted to take it – and why he finally turned it down.**

*If his highness can be moved to accept of it [the crown], the services he hath done the nations have abundantly deserved it; but if he who hath so much merited it do judge it fit to continue his refusal of it, the contempt of a crown – which can not proceed but from an extraordinary virtue – will render him, in the esteem of all whose opinion is to be valued, more honourable than any that wear it.*

When the ambassador to France, Sir William Lockhart, wrote this in April 1657, it had been nearly two months since the first formal offer by Parliament to make Oliver Cromwell king, and in England people were waiting anxiously for the Lord Protector to make up his mind. Would he choose to become King Oliver or not?

The offer of the crown in the spring of 1657 marked the end of a long series of rumours, backed up by indiscreet comments by those around the Protector, that he would soon assume the crown of the three kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland, which had been in abeyance since the execution of Charles I in 1649. Cromwell’s position since the founding of the Protectorate in the closing weeks of 1653 was already quasi-regal. As Protector, he was head of state, and enjoyed many of the trappings of power – he lived in the former royal palaces, he held sway over his own court, and he was the dominant figure not only in the government but also in Parliament. There were certain restraints: he had to govern in accordance with a written constitution, and he had to rule with the consent of a council. The importance of the army in drawing up that constitution, and the presence of senior officers on the council reinforced Cromwell’s reliance on the military, which was the Achilles heel of the protectorate. Military rule was expensive and unpopular, and condemned the regime to receive support from only a minority of the people. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the hostile reaction received by the Major-­Generals, who ruled the counties of England and Wales from the autumn of 1655. To secure the ‘healing and settling’ of the nations, and provide permanent solutions to the problems raised and exacerbated by a decade of civil war, a more broadly based, civilian government was needed. It was this that prompted the first offer of the crown to Cromwell, under a new constitution known as the ‘Remonstrance’, presented to Parliament on February 23rd, 1657. Parliament debated the proposals long and hard, and after substantial modification, the renamed ‘Humble Petition and Advice’ was formally sub­mitted for Cromwell’s approval on  March 31st. After a long period of deliberation and prayer, on May 8th, Cromwell rejected the crown, while accepting the main tenets of the new, civilian, constitution.

Most historians agree that the rejection of the crown was Crom­well’s finest hour. Like Sir William Lockhart, they see his decision to refuse the top job as a touchstone of his greatness, the benchmark of his ‘extraordinary virtue’. In recent years historical explanations for Cromwell’s refusal have shifted. Sir Charles Firth, writing a century ago, emphasized Cromwell’s prudence in not antagonizing the army, whose officers had grown suspicious of the Protector’s worldly ambition, which they saw as a betrayal of all that they had fought for during the civil wars.  Cromwell’s religious motives are now emphasized by many historians. The delay in Cromwell making up his mind was caused by a kind of spiritual paralysis. Although tempted by the fruits of a return to traditional forms of government, Cromwell was acutely aware of God’s judgement on him and his actions. While the godly New Model Army continued to be victorious, it was clear that Providence was on his side; but recent reverses, especially the disastrous ‘Western Design’ to take Hispaniola in the West Indies from the Spanish in 1655, had raised doubts in his mind. The religious radicals (including many in the army) were insistent that Cromwell risked incurring God’s anger. The crown had been destroyed forever with the execution of Charles I, and to resurrect the title was dangerous. Like the biblical Achan, whose greed had brought a curse on the people of Israel after the capture of Jericho, the crowning of Cromwell would bring God’s wrath not only against himself but also against the nation. It was this that caused Cromwell to reject the crown, and he made a direct reference to it when addressing a parliamentary committee in April:

Truly the providence of God has laid this title aside providentially … I would not seek to set up that that providence hath destroyed and laid in the dust, and I would not build Jericho again.

In the historical accounts of the period, Cromwell’s dramatic refusal of the crown has naturally taken centre stage. But what of the initial offer of it? How did the supporters of kingship prepare the ground for the presentation of the Remonstrance that began the kingship debates in Parliament? Historians tend to follow a well-trodden path in trying to explain the sequence of events behind this. After years of speculation, the issue of a ‘hereditary succession’ was raised in Parliament in November 1656, and with it the possibility of erecting a Cromwellian monarchy; but the proponents of kingship judged that the time was not yet right to push for a return to traditional forms of government. Only after the Militia Bill, which aimed to confirm the rule of the Major-Generals, was voted down by Parliament on January 29th, 1657, were politicians confident that military power could be challenged nationally. It was this success that ushered in the kingship debates, and historians such as John Morrill, Peter Gaunt and Carol Egloff are quick to draw a direct connection between the demise of the Militia Bill and the introduction of the Remonstrance, even though the gap between the two was nearly four weeks. Moreover, this neat chronology often leaves out one major factor that reveals the extent of the careful preparations that were being made for kingship, and points to who was behind the offer itself.

The key to the prehistory of the Remonstrance is in fact the plot against Cromwell’s life led by Miles Sindercombe. Sindercombe, a disillusioned soldier and political radical, was the leader of a small group of conspirators who placed a bomb – ‘a great ball of fire’ – in the chapel at Whitehall at the dead of night on  January 8th, 1657, intending to burn down the Protector’s apartments nearby. One of Sindercombe’s men revealed the plot, and the device was discovered before it could go off. The plot itself is of minor importance, but the government’s reaction is very interesting. Instead of playing down its significance, and seeking to allay the fears of the people, those around Cromwell did their best to whip up a frenzy of excited speculation. Rumours were rife at Westminster in the next few days, but an announcement of the plot was made to Parliament only on January 19th. On that day the secretary of the council (and chief of intelligence) John Thurloe (1616-68), reported the details of the plot, and emphasized that it involved not only home-grown terrorists but also foreign powers; the soldiers were ‘Levellers’ violently opposed to the regime; they were in touch with the court of Charles II in exile; and, worryingly,

... the place where that design was hatched is in Flanders, a place fit for such designs of assassination, at the Spanish court there.

Thurloe’s report had something to alarm everyone. In response, leading courtiers asked for a day of thanksgiving for ‘this deliverance’; the army supporters called for the strengthening of the powers of the Major-Generals to provide greater security; and their opponents suggested a much more far-reaching response: to put the government on a more stable footing, through a return to civilian government according to ‘the ancient constitution’. Kingship was not proposed at this stage, but everyone knew that an ‘ancient constitution’ would contain a monarchical element.

The debate on the constitution died down without a resolution, but there were soon further attempts to use the plot for political ends. Miles Sindercombe’s trial was carefully managed during the first weeks of February. The judge was a courtier, Lord Chief Justice John Glynn, and every detail was lovingly related in the newsbooks, which were heavily influenced by John Thurloe. Alongside the trial, there was a crescendo of rumour and gossip that there would soon be ‘a reducing of the government to kingship’ and that ‘his highness is not averse’ to the idea. It was said that some Londoners were putting bets on an imminent change of government. Again, the government influenced newsbooks were happy to add to these stories, and to emphasise the importance of preserving the life of Cromwell ‘and to come to such a settlement as may secure him and us’. The outcome of the trial was not in doubt, and February 14th was soon set for Sindercombe’s public execution. The main actor, however, refused to come to the stage, instead taking his own life the night before. Sindercombe’s suicide robbed Thurloe and his friends of their propaganda coup, but their focus soon shifted to the day of thanksgiving, which was to take place on February 20th. This was to be celebrated across the three nations, and two days before, Cromwell issued a personal invitation to MPs to dine with him at the Banqueting House in Whitehall. The feast was as opulent as the surroundings. Four hundred dishes of meat were provided, and the ‘entertainment’ – said to be ‘the rarest ever seen in England’ – was rounded off with ‘exquisite music’.

The grandeur was intentional. Not only was this a mark of the nations’ pleasure at Cromwell’s ‘deliverance’, it was also designed to be the occasion for something altogether more significant. Both the French and Venetian ambassadors believed that Cromwell would now be crowned, and according to the latter

... many think that on this occasion his highness will be presented with the crown, since the question of the succession was brought up again some days ago and they speak as if it was decided.

In the event, it was not Friday,  February 20th, but Monday, February 23th when the formal offer was made; and it was not made at a court feast but in the suitably sober setting of the House of Commons, representing the three nations. The Remonstrance unveiled in the House was explicitly a response to the Sindercombe plot. It begged Cromwell

to reflect upon that which lies much upon our hearts, which is the continual danger [which] your life is in from the bloody practices both of the malignants and the discontented party (one whereof, through the goodness of God, you have been lately delivered from), it being a received principle amongst them that (no person being declared to succeed you in the government) nothing is wanting to bring us into blood and confusion and them to their desired ends, but the destruction of your person…

The Remonstrance thus asserted that the solution to the threat of assassination plots was a civilian ‘settlement’, with Cromwell as the accepted monarch, and the succession defined and secured. Such arguments certainly seem to have had the desired effect: the majority in the Commons in favour of giving the document a formal reading was nearly three to one.

While the threat of anarchy following an assassination clearly had an impact on ordinary MPs, the army’s greatest fears – for all their personal attachment to the Protector – were of royalist insurrection and foreign invasion. In January, Thurloe had been at pains to stress the plotters’ connections with the Stuart court in exile and with Spain, and it is perhaps significant that throughout the period of Sindercombe’s trial the newsbooks were pumping out scare stories about a heightened threat of invasion. Spanish and Irish troops were being mustered in Flanders, ready to sail to England under Charles II; ships had been sent by the Spanish government to provide transport and a naval escort; money was being raised across Catholic Europe. Such newsbook reports were reinforced by private letters from Thurloe. In early February he warned the Commander-in-Chief in Scotland, George Monck, of an invasion from the north; similar letters were dispatched to Henry Cromwell, Lieutenant-General of the Irish forces. These warnings became more urgent as the day of thanksgiving approached. On February 19th, letters were sent to the militia officers in England and Wales, ordering them to be on their guard for both a foreign invasion and a domestic insurrection. All three nations were being put on red alert.

Yet there is strong evidence that the crisis was in fact a fiction constructed by Secretary Thurloe. Although there had been alarms during the winter of 1656-57, by February it was becoming clear that the likelihood of the exiled royalists being able to mount an invasion was receding. Charles II and his brother, the Duke of York, had had a very public row in January, and the court in exile was thrown into disarray. Money was painfully short. Sums had to be borrowed to pay for messengers to England, in February it was reported that ‘they have not £5 for military service or to buy anything the king wants’, and before long Charles II was forced to admit that the invasion would have to be delayed. Thurloe’s own intelligence papers suggest that he knew this. Although some agents still warned of preparations for invasion, many insisted that the Stuarts had few soldiers and no money, and by mid-February it was correctly reported that their men had been siphoned off for use in the Spanish war against France – leaving the royalists ‘very much discouraged’.

There is little doubt that Thurloe was aware of the decline in royalist fortunes when he organized letters to the militia officers on February 19th. A further reason for suspecting that Thurloe was manipulating the army is provided by two letters sent by him to Henry Cromwell and George Monck on February 24th – the day after the Remonstrance was introduced to Parliament. In both he announced that the threat of invasion had suddenly come to an end. As he told Henry,

I hear Charles Stuart’s intention of landing forces doth somewhat cool, the Spaniard as yet failing him in his supplies promised.

This phrase was repeated in the letter to Monck; but Thurloe then let the cat out of the bag, as he asked the Scottish commander to watch

... the posture of the army with you, because some unquiet spirits or other will take this or any other occasion to put the army into discontent by false reports.

The newsbook reports, the alarmist letters, the rapid move to defuse fears once the Remonstrance had been welcomed by Parliament: all suggest that John Thurloe was mounting an elaborate confidence trick, with the army as his target. And it very nearly worked. The army leaders may have been outspoken in their opposition to kingship, but there was no mutiny across the three nations. In a pincer movement, Thurloe and his friends had not only ensured that the Remonstrance, with its offer of the crown, would be well received by MPs aware of the risk of delaying a civilian ‘settlement’, they had also neutralized the risk of an uprising by the armed forces, who knew all too well that civilian rule would threaten their own power in the state.

John Thurloe may have been the most important person preparing both Parliament and the army to accept the Remonstrance in February 1657, but he was not working alone. The names of his collaborators can be gleaned from other sources. The Treasury commissioner, Bulstrode Whitelocke, implied that he knew of the details of the Remonstrance before it was presented, and suggested that the Irish peer, Roger Boyle, Lord Broghill, and the judge in Sindercombe’s trial, John Glynn, were involved in its preparation. The Coventry MP, Robert Beake, also named names. In a letter of March 28th, 1657, he said that the new constitution had been the work of a ‘cabal’ whose members ‘did … prepare the thing without doors’ before managing affairs in Parliament. These men were Broghill, Glynn, four councillors (Nathaniel Fiennes, Sir Charles Wolseley, Philip Jones and Edward Montagu) and John Thurloe. All these men are known to have supported the return to a monarchical constitution, and their involvement in the early stages is quite probable. But there is one man who is conspicuous by his absence from such lists – Oliver Cromwell himself.

Historians have routinely rejected the possibility that Cromwell actively pursued the crown. The logic, however, seems to be that as Cromwell eventually rejected the crown, he did not seek to be king at any time. However sorely tempted by the blandishments of the ‘kinglings’, he remained true to the ‘good old cause’. The offer of the crown came from others, and it came as a nasty surprise. Even if he had an inkling of what was coming, he did not approve or encourage it. Yet there are good reasons for suspecting that Cromwell knew about the proposed Remonstrance and welcomed it wholeheartedly. It is suspicious that the original plan was to offer him the crown at a feast hosted by himself; and there can be no doubt that Thurloe’s attempt to unite the army by playing up security threats was endorsed by Cromwell. The letters of February 19th to the militia officers, warning them of unrest at home and abroad, were signed by the Protector in person; and these were followed, on February 23rd, by another letter from Cromwell, reiterating the threat to security. From what we know of the relationship between the two men, it is surely inconceivable that Thurloe would have tried to dupe Cromwell into rubber stamping such orders without knowing their contents, or that he would have played the same alarmist tricks on the Protector as he had on Henry Cromwell or George Monck to procure the Protector’s signature. Such dangerous games would have been entirely out of character for the smooth, self-effacing Thurloe. Furthermore, there is evidence that Cromwell was not above political manipulation. After the royalist rising led by John Penruddock in 1655, it was reported that Cromwell intended to make political capital from it, not least to ensure that ‘the army and the honest people of the nation are hereby become united’. The French ambassador greeted Cromwell’s firebrand speech to Parliament in September 1656 with cynicism, saying that the Protector had exaggerated the threat posed by the royalists and their foreign allies, and reporting that ‘many believe it is invented and feigned to give an alarm and to keep the army united’. Attempts to play up the significance of the Sindercombe plot and the associated threat of foreign invasion seem to come from the same mould.

Cromwell’s apparent willingness to aid and abet Thurloe’s machinations also puts into context his initial reaction to the army’s forthright opposition to the new constitution. In an angry confrontation on the evening of February 23rd, a group of Major-Generals complained to Cromwell of Parliament’s actions, and received a curt reply:

... what would you have me do, are they [the Parliament] not a thing of your own garbling ... and now do you complain to me? Did I meddle with it?

These were not the words of a man who had just been presented with a new constitution (including an offer of the crown) against his will. A second tense meeting with the officers took place just five days later. On that occasion one hundred officers demanded

... that his highness would not hearken to the title [of king] because it was not pleasing to his army and was a matter of scandal to the people of God.

Cromwell did not calm their fears; he shouted them down. He told them in no uncertain terms that the days of military rule were numbered:

... it is time to come to a settlement, and lay aside arbitrary proceedings so unacceptable to the nation ...

and when it came to the crown, ‘for his part he loved the title, a feather in a hat, as little as they did’. Cromwell thus waved away the army’s concerns rather than address them. He did not openly renounce kingship (as he easily could have done) but played down its significance. The message he hoped to convey was that it was of no importance to him.

Contemporaries clearly thought that such statements were disingenuous. The reaction of the senior officers on the council, who withdrew from meetings, and a number of MPs, who absented themselves from the House, shows that they fully believed that Cromwell was about to take the crown. The supporters of kingship certainly thought that this was the case, and they were mystified by Cromwell’s gradual loss of enthusiasm during April, and dismayed by his eventual refusal in May. His change of mind revealed that, for all his ambition and desire for settlement, his heart was still ruled by God.

His rejection of the crown seems to have been both late and genuine – a change from desiring the crown and using all his political powers to secure it, to the realization that he was on the brink of committing a terrible sin. This, rather than the failure of the ‘Western Design’ against the Spanish colonies nearly two years before is surely the context for Cromwell’s belief that had very nearly brought the wrath of God on the nation. For Achan’s sin was not reluctantly to agree, under pressure from others, to take the ‘accursed thing’ – he went secretly and took it for himself. It was not so much the failure of the army but Cromwell’s own failure to resist temptation that troubled his conscience in early May 1657, when he rejected the crown and refused ‘to build Jericho again’.

**For further reading**

Patrick Little (ed.), The Cromwellian Protectorate (Boydell and Brewer, 2007); C. H. Firth, The Last Years of the Protectorate (2 vols., 1909); Peter Gaunt, Oliver Cromwell (Blackwell, 1998); J.C. Davis, Oliver Cromwell (Arnold, 2001); Barry Coward, The Cromwellian Protectorate (Manchester UP, 2002).

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