A twenty-first-century tourist, visiting the battle sites of the American and British Civil Wars, might be surprised at how little the latter are commemorated today in Britain. Compare Gettysburg, littered with monuments to the combatants of both sides, to the absence of so much as a marker for most English battle sites of the 1640s before the nineteenth century, and the misplacement of both the nineteenth- and twentieth-century obelisks for the battle of Naseby! Most people in Britain have never embraced the revolutionary actions that resulted from its Civil Wars. Margaret Thatcher even claimed, during bicentenary festivities for the French Revolution in 1989, that Britain was great precisely because it had never had a revolution. If British attitudes to the events of the 1640s and 1650s are conflicted and ambiguous, it may be because, unlike the American Civil Wars, there was no clear “right” side for politically correct moderns to embrace. Rather, most participants, whether Royalists or Parliamentarians, soldiers or clergymen, sought to uphold some version of the established order. Nearly all claimed that they were defending traditional values and the core of the English constitution in Church and State. They just could not agree on what those values and core were.

When the Long Parliament met in 1640, the political nation – nobility, gentry, and urban oligarchs – had been almost unanimous in their desire to undo the policies of the Personal Rule. But over the next two years, as the parliamentary leadership grew more radical in pursuit of that goal, a remarkable transformation took place. In the months following the king’s departure from London, some 236 MPs followed him, leaving 302 in the capital. What separated these two groups? While both agreed that Charles had gone too far in the 1630s, the former felt that Pym and his supporters had gone farther still in the opposite direction, and thus become the greater danger to the English constitution in Church and State. Put simply, this group of MPs worried less about royal tyranny and popery than they did about civil disorder and anarchy. They were unwilling to sanction a fundamental readjustment of the constitution in order to enhance Parliament’s power at the expense of the king’s. Nor did they want to see godly reformation of
the Church if it meant tampering with beloved ceremonies and repudiating uniformity and discipline. They would go to war to defend a traditional order which they knew to be flawed but which, in their view, still represented the best interests of themselves and the nation. During the ensuing conflict, these men would come to be known as Royalists or Cavaliers.¹

Even among their opponents, there were very few in 1642 who wanted to depose the king and establish a republic. Most believed that they, too, fought for the proper balance of the English constitution and some went so far as to say that they opposed the king in order to defend him from malevolent advisers who were manipulating him into popery and tyranny. In any case, most on this side were committed so fully to the gains made by the Long Parliament, believed so fully in the existence of a Catholic–absolutist plot to subvert their religion and liberty, and distrusted Charles so completely, that they saw their only recourse in taking up arms against him. This group of MPs would come to be known as the Parliamentarians or Roundheads.²

Still, it takes more than 538 people to make a war. Most English men and women were reluctant to take a stand, let alone fight. Ordinary people often switched sides depending on which army was in town, and generally failed to see this as their feud: “what is the cause to me if my goods be lost?” was the sentiment of many.³ Others tried to opt out on principle. By 1645, in at least 11 counties, generals from both sides were forced to negotiate with lesser gentry and yeomen, armed with clubs and farming implements, called “Clubmen.” Their goal was to prevent troops and tax assessors from despoiling their county, but many were eventually forced to put up, pay up, and choose a side. When that moment came, on what bases did the English people choose?

This was a civil war, not a war between states or regions, nor a class war, and certainly not a gender war. It therefore was – and is – difficult to predict who would support which side. Certainly, more peers and clergy supported the Royalists, but these groups were insignificant proportions of the total population. In any case, there were Parliamentarian peers and clergy as well. The gentry split almost evenly, with over half avoiding choosing either side openly. Upper-class women like Lady Brilliana Harley (1598–1643) defended their estates while husbands on both sides were away. Lower-class women were highly visible in the petitioning campaigns that raged through London, usually on the side of the radicals. London merchants and lawyers also probably opted more for Parliament than for the king: since the City had opted for the former, and their bread and butter lay there, material interest probably influenced their decision. Artisans in the many clothworking towns also sided with Parliament. But probably as many town councils supported the king as supported his opponents. At the lowest level, in the countryside, historians used to assume a lack of choice: tenants would simply do what they were told by their landlords in support of one side or the other. But recent research suggests that ordinary people at the parish level knew what the war was about and followed the political, military, and religious changes closely. Thus, both sides could call on unfeigned support up and down the social scale. Geographically, the king’s strength tended to lie to the West and the North,
Parliament’s to the East and South, but this had as much to do with the location of their respective headquarters as anything else. Theologically, those with “godly” or Puritan religious values became Parliamentarians, whereas Laudians and those loyal to the conservative liturgy became Royalists. Catholics may have sympathized with the king, but most, understandably, sought to stay well out of the fighting. Overall, then, religious belief had the greatest perceptible influence on which side one chose, but since we have no religious census for the 1640s, this does not tell us as much as we would like to know.

Nevertheless, it should be obvious from this analysis that, whatever the motivations behind these choices, however heterogeneous the two sides, one of them had all the long-term material advantages. By controlling the southeast, Parliament had access to the wealthiest and most populous part of the country. This gave it the larger tax base and recruitment pool for its armies. More particularly, in seizing control of London, Parliament possessed the nation’s greatest port, its administrative and financial nerve center, and a substantial military force in the trained bands. This would make it easier to collect taxes, solicit loans, raise armies, and keep them supplied. Moreover, in July 1642, most of the navy – built with Charles’s own Ship Money, ironically – went over to Parliament. By controlling the ports, the navy, and that part of England closest to Europe, Parliament was able to block the king from receiving aid from other European monarchies, all of whom paid lip service to his cause but, in the end, little more. The only question was whether the parliamentary side could survive long enough for these factors to come into play. This was uncertain because, as in the American Civil War two centuries later, while most of the nation’s fiscal, industrial, and naval capacity was on one side, most of its experienced military talent fought on the other. That is, at first, the best soldiers were the king’s. So, in one sense, the First English Civil War was a race to see if Royalist military experience could win the day before parliamentary fiscal and demographic might proved overwhelming.

Rebellion, 1642–6

It should therefore come as no surprise that the first campaign, in the autumn of 1642, began well for the king. The earl of Essex, who led the parliamentary army, had allowed the Royalists to get between him and London when both armies met and fought the first set-piece battle at Edgehill, in north Oxfordshire, on October 23 (see map 11). The king’s nephew, Prince Rupert of the Rhine (1619–82), leading a wing of the Royalist cavalry, smashed through the parliamentary horse and pursued them for miles. By the time his men and their worn-out horses returned to the battle, however, the parliamentary infantry had stood firm at the push of pike in the center and both sides retired. The battle was, therefore, technically a draw, but it left the Royalists controlling the west Midlands, with a clear path to London. The king’s army set off for the capital; only a massed defense by soldiers and the London trained bands halted Rupert’s troops
Map 11  *The Bishops’ Wars and Civil Wars, 1637–60.*
just west of the city at Turnham Green. Subsequently, Charles retired to winter at Oxford, which would be his headquarters for the duration of the war.

Edgehill showed that there would be no quick end to this war. Both sides had to prepare for the long haul along a broad front. Yet, traditional English military organization, the militia (county-wide musters of farmers, serving in and about the shire, under the command of their landlords), was temporary and local. When, for example, Norfolk first raised money and troops for Parliament, one gentleman specified they were “for the defence of the county, not to be sent out.” The farmers and tradesmen who made up the county militia tended to grumble and desert if they fought too far from home. Parliament dealt with this by reorganizing county-based armies into regional ones: the Eastern Association, comprised of East Anglia and surrounding counties, was one of the strongest. But no one region was exclusively loyal to one side or the other. Even Kent, solidly controlled by Parliament, experienced localized Royalist uprisings. Clearly localism, the lack of a sense of national purpose, would hamper both sides.

Further, paying and outfitting vast armies required massive organization. Here, Parliament proved the most innovative, thanks to John Pym’s realistic leadership. In order to man the parliamentary armies, he convinced Parliament to agree to the forced impressment of soldiers. In order to supply and pay them, he secured parliamentary approval for the sequestration (i.e., confiscation) of Royalists’ lands, compulsory weekly (later monthly) county assessments, continuation of the Customs duties, and a new tax called the Excise (today, we would call it a sales tax) on those necessary and popular commodities ale, beer, cider, perry (distilled from pears), and tobacco. In the short run, these measures got the parliamentary armies paid and improved the provisional government’s credit by providing solid security for loans. In the long run they led to the creation of a more efficient infrastructure for local government and laid the groundwork for the British tax system for the next 200 years. But they also mocked earlier concerns about Charles’s illegal taxation. As one Lancashire man pointed out, parliamentary assessment was “illegal, and the Earl of Strafford lost his life for the like act.” Parliament’s Excise commissioners had unlimited search powers, which had been one of the great complaints against the early Stuart monopolists. New county committees collected local assessments and impressed soldiers in place of the (often Royalist) JPs, although, at first, they attempted to keep funds and soldiers at home. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in those areas which he controlled, the king was more inclined to work through traditional institutions – transferring Chancery, Exchequer, and the court of Wards to Oxford – and local assessments. But as these broke down, his field officers resorted to free quarter and plunder. Counting the costs of this war is difficult, but a single example gives some idea of the scale: Kent’s yearly payment for Ship Money in the 1630s barely equaled that county’s monthly payment to Parliament in 1645–6. England’s tax burden, as a proportion of the gross national product, was probably heavier in the 1640s than it had ever been or would be until the world wars of the twentieth century.

Despite Parliament’s financial superiority, the campaigning season of 1643 saw Royalist victories in the North, West Midlands, and Southwest, in particular the
capture of the port of Bristol. This made it easier for the king to maintain communications with, and eventually employ, troops from Ireland. That year, he ordered the Royalist commander there, James Butler, marquess of Ormond (1610–88), to come to terms with the Catholic Confederates of Kilkenny for the purpose of raising troops for England. Parliamentary seizure and publication in 1645 of the king’s private correspondence on this matter – in which he promised the Catholics not only religious toleration but that their bishops could sit in the Irish House of Lords – would further discredit him with his Protestant subjects. But Parliament, too, sought outside reinforcements from a Celtic kingdom. In mid-1643, Pym, dying of cancer, engineered the Solemn League and Covenant with the Scots, whose army was the most battle-hardened in the British Isles. The Covenanters put a high price on their friendship: £30,000 a month (here, Parliament’s new taxation was crucial) and a parliamentary commitment to establish a strict Presbyterian settlement on England. In the end, the religious settlement worked out by the Westminster Assembly of (largely Presbyterian) Divines (see below) pleased few. But the military settlement worked: early in 1644 the Scottish Covenanters marched south in support of Parliament, threatening the king’s control of the North. Prince Rupert rushed to relieve the Royalists at York and, late in the day on July 2, 1644, met the parliamentary forces, which included the Scots and armies from Yorkshire and the Eastern Association. The battle of Marston Moor (see map 11) was the bloodiest of the entire war. The turning point came when the Eastern Association cavalry, led by an obscure gentleman from Huntingdonshire named Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), charged and routed Rupert’s flank. In the center, the Scots infantry stood firm and, when Cromwell turned his horses back to help them, the battle turned to a rout. Some 4,000 Cavaliers were killed. As Cromwell noted, “God made them as stubble to our swords.”

Marston Moor was a shattering blow to the Royalists, but not the decisive victory for the Parliamentarians that it could have been. This was because there seemed to be no consistent war strategy and precious little military competence on the parliamentary side. In 1644, for example, Essex was lured into Devon and Cornwall only to be surrounded on a tiny peninsula, from which he and his staff managed to escape by boat, leaving their infantry and artillery to surrender. In the face of such disasters, the parliamentary coalition began to fall out over war aims. Cromwell attacked the Eastern Association commander, Edward Montagu, earl of Manchester (1602–71), for failing to pursue the king’s troops energetically in several indecisive battles in the Midlands. Manchester’s response indicates the ambivalence on the parliamentary side: “if we beat the King ninety and nine times yet he is King still, and so will his posterity be after him, but if the King beat us once we shall be all hanged, and our posterity made slaves.” Cromwell, who often saw things with crystal clarity, replied, “My Lord, if this be so, why did we take up arms at first? This is against fighting ever hereafter; if so, let us make peace, be it never so base.” Their exchange exemplifies the emerging struggle among the Parliamentarians between a peace party and a war party, between those who fought in order to get the king back to the bargaining table, and those who fought
to defeat the king, and then bargain. The former tended to be moderate Puritans who were attracted to the order and discipline of a Presbyterian religious settlement. Therefore, at great risk of oversimplification, the peace group, led by Essex in the Lords and Denzil Holles in the Commons, will be referred to below as parliamentary Presbyterians. Ranged against them was a group of MPs who fought the war with greater enthusiasm and who increasingly favored a more radical religious agenda which would leave individual congregations free, or independent, to make their own decisions about governance and ritual within a loose national Church. This group, led by Saye and Sele in the Lords and Oliver St. John in the Commons, will be referred to as parliamentary Independents.

While the Scottish option temporarily solved Parliament’s military difficulties, it proved ruinously expensive, not to mention offensive to Independents who had no intention of trading religious oppression by Laudian bishops for that by an English version of the Kirk: in the words of the poet and radical polemicist, John Milton (1608–74), “new presbyter is but old priest writ large.” A fresh start was necessary. In the spring of 1645, Parliament passed a Self-Denying Ordinance, which required all current peers and MPs to surrender their military commands. This neatly excluded such underachievers as Essex and Manchester, though at least one exception was made for Cromwell, the most successful general. At the same time, it was proposed to “new model” the army, to reorganize Parliament’s major county and regional units into one centralized force, with unified command and promotion through the ranks, without regard to social standing, birth, or connection. In other words, Parliament was abandoning the traditional militia model upon which most previous English armies had been based. It was also abandoning the Scots Presbyterians. This army’s soldiers would be English, employed full-time, well paid, and ready to march anywhere—within England, at least. While there was no requirement that its officers be “godly,” they had to be enthusiastic for the fight; in practice these tended to be enthusiastic in religion as well. Their captain-general, Sir Thomas Fairfax (1612–71), and their general of Horse, Cromwell, were men of proven commitment and ability.

The New Model Army demonstrated its mettle at Naseby, in Northamptonshire, on June 14, 1645, by defeating a more experienced Royalist force in the last decisive battle of the war (see map 11). Cromwell commanded the right wing of cavalry, his son-in-law, Henry Ireton (1611–51), the left, and Fairfax the infantry in the center. Rupert’s Royalist cavalry pushed through Ireton’s horse only to meet heavy resistance at the baggage train. The infantry at the center was evenly matched. But when Cromwell’s forces charged down the flank, they overwhelmed, first, the Royalist cavalry on his wing, and then the infantry in the center: 4,500 Royalist officers and soldiers surrendered. It was only a matter of time until Charles’s last western strongholds fell. The first English Civil War ended within a year. Before turning to its aftermath, it is important to tally the impact of the war itself. In four years of continuous fighting (in fact, hostilities would persist throughout the British Isles off and on through 1651), about one in eight adult males had seen combat; perhaps one in three bore arms at some point. Often, commanders on both sides showed little mercy to civilian populations. As a result,
over 180,000 people were killed, some 3.6 percent of the population – a higher proportion of Englishmen killed than in any other war, including World War I.

Revolution, 1646–9

One might think that, with the war won by Parliament, the issues which had provoked it could now be settled. But how? After all, the consequences of Naseby were unprecedented in early modern England: a rightful and undisputed king had been defeated militarily by a rebellious army which sought not to depose him but to limit his power. Previously, during the Wars of the Roses, the struggle had been between rival claimants to royal power – one king versus another. But in 1646 there was only one king and everyone agreed who he was. The question was now, what to do with him? Would he agree to a compromise with Parliament limiting his prerogative? And, if not, what then? Recall Manchester’s fear that if he “beat us once we shall all be hanged.” Even if Charles was disposed to be conciliatory, there was a deeper constitutional problem to be addressed. How could the king accept limitations to make him behave as his subjects wanted and still be king? There were few precedents or models in the early modern world for a compromise: that is, a constitutional monarchy. In their absence, few people wanted to confront the real question left over from the First Civil War: “king or no king?” Because they were unable to confront this larger question, the interested parties began to negotiate over smaller ones.

Before turning to the negotiations themselves, it must be understood that the interested parties were not confined to king and Parliament. They included the Scots Covenanters, Irish Confederates, and the European powers who considered sending aid to both sides at various points. Parliament itself continued to be divided between the Presbyterian “peace party,” who feared disorder and so wanted an agreement with Charles at any price, and the Independent “war party,” who had sought his abject defeat in order to pursue religious reform and preserve the new constitutional framework erected in 1641. And finally, there was the instrument of victory itself, the chief consumer of the government’s revenue and the greatest concentration of ordinary people on either side, the army. No wonder that Sir Jacob Astley (recently created Baron Astley; 1579–1652), one of the last important Royalist officers to surrender, supposedly said to the victorious parliamentary forces, “you have now done your work, boys, and may go to play, unless you will fall out amongst yourselves.” The various stakeholders in these negotiations meant, on the one hand, that the king could play each side off against the others. Having lost the war, he might still win the peace. On the other hand, he might become the prize, like the king in a colossal game of chess.

For the next two years Charles negotiated with each interest group, sometimes simultaneously, often repeatedly. But he never did so sincerely. As in his dealings with the Long Parliament in 1640–2, he played for time and, perhaps, a continental, Scottish, or Irish army. He never had any intention of giving up one iota of his prerogative. Rather, he felt that he had already given up too much in signing
Strafford’s death warrant and that his recent military defeats were a punishment from God for his earlier compromises. So, once again, he prevaricated, dissembled, and, when push came to shove, refused to budge. He knew full well that this course might be personally fatal; his goal was to preserve the monarchy for his children and successors. As he told Prince Rupert just prior to surrendering in 1646:

I confess that, speaking as a mere soldier or statesman, there is no probability but of my ruin; yet, as a Christian, I must tell you that God will not suffer rebels and traitors to prosper, nor this cause to be overthrown; and whatever personal punishment it shall please him to inflict on me, must not make me repine, much less give over this quarrel…. Indeed I cannot flatter myself with expectation of good success more than this, to end my days with honour and a good conscience.11

For the king, honor and a good conscience had meant sneaking out of besieged Oxford in disguise and riding to surrender himself to the Scots outside Newark, Nottinghamshire, in May 1646 because he thought they might offer him the best deal. He was correct, but when he balked at giving up episcopacy the Scots gave him up to Parliament in January 1647 for £400,000. For a few months Holles’s Presbyterians controlled both Parliament and the king. Their most pressing problem was the army and the swingeing taxes it consumed. Despite the soldiers’ obvious service to the parliamentary cause, the conservative Presbyterian majority in Parliament did not know what to do with them now that the war was over. The soldiers were demanding their back pay (about £600,000) and an Act of Indemnity, that is, a law absolving them of responsibility for acts committed in wartime. In fact, many Presbyterian MPs were more worried about what former soldiers might do in peacetime. They feared the disorder that such a large, experienced force of relatively common warriors, trained in violence, could bring to the countryside if they got hungry, or greedy. Since the army was said to be full of religious zealots, they also feared that the soldiers wanted to turn their victory into revolution by breaking down the existing religious, social, and political order.

In 1647 Parliament decided to deal with the issue by disbanding as much of the army as it could without pay, and sending the rest to pacify Ireland. But the soldiers took a dim view of being sent off to die in the bogs of Ireland before their pay and indemnity were resolved. The resulting crisis politicized them. Unpaid and unloved by their parliamentary masters, the soldiers began to listen to radical notions of independence in religion, equality in society, and even a degree of democracy in government. Their leaders came to see the only hope of getting justice for their men in having a say in the negotiations to settle the State. Regiments each selected an “agitator,” a sort of union shop steward, to represent them – an example of democracy in action. In June the army declared that it was no “mere mercenary army” fighting for pay but was, rather, dedicated “to the defence of our own and the people’s just rights and liberties,” and that they would not disband until their grievances were settled.12 In other words, the army and the army alone (not Parliament) truly represented the national interest – and would now decide where the revolution stopped. To emphasize the point, a group of subordinate
officers seized the king and deposited him at army headquarters at Newmarket, Suffolk. In August, the army entered London, forced out Holles and other Presbyterians, and began to negotiate with the king on the basis of a document entitled the Heads of the Proposals. It proposed that a bicameral Parliament be elected every two years; that Parliament control the army and navy and nominate all royal ministers; and that all Protestant churches be tolerated in England under a non-coercive episcopacy. This document, if enacted, would have been the first written constitution in English history. Instead, as usual, the king prevaricated, then refused it outright.

At this point the army itself divided. The generals and most officers, known as the Grandees, wanted to maintain military discipline and gentry control of the localities. The rank-and-file, led by their agitators and a small group of political activists known as the Levellers, wanted a fundamental change in how England was ruled. For starters, they demanded near universal manhood suffrage, liberty of conscience and, at most, a constitutional monarchy. They also advocated legal reform, urging that court documents be written in simple English, that punishments fit crimes, speedy trials by juries, and equality under the law. Finally, they sought a welfare state for widows and orphans of soldiers. The Levellers put their case to the Grandees in a series of debates at Putney Church, just outside London, at the end of October 1647. The Putney Debates focused on a proposed Leveller constitution, The Agreement of the People (1647), and, specifically, its suggestion that the franchise be enlarged. Though many spoke, Ireton best advanced the Grandee position, arguing that they had fought the king to restore the Ancient Constitution, not to change it. He therefore defended the time-honored requirement of 40 shillings (£2) of land for would-be voters and maintained that the franchise should always reside in those with “a permanent fixed interest in this kingdom,” that is, in “the persons in whom all land lies, and in those corporations in whom all trading lies.” We have seen this argument before, though Ireton’s admission of those “in whom all trading lies” was a progressive concession to the growing wealth and ambitions of the mercantile community. In response, Colonel Thomas Rainsborough (d. 1648) set forth the Leveller position that “the poorest he that is in England has a life to live as the greatest he.” His corollary was “that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government.” Here, with eloquent simplicity, the common man demands to be part of the political process irrespective of birth or wealth. Rainsborough’s rationale, based not on civil law (statute), common law (Ancient Constitution), nor God’s law (the Bible), but on natural law (Reason), was a new and dangerous concept that seemed to undermine the hierarchical principle heretofore at the heart of English life. Later in the century it would receive an even clearer and more decisive exposition by John Locke and others. In the end, though the army left Putney with nothing really decided, the Debates remain a monument to the political consciousness of ordinary people, and, more immediately, reveal the army discussing the future with little or no thought about the king.

Soon after Putney, the king fled once again, this time to the Isle of Wight. This put him no closer to safety: though he might look across the English Channel to
France, Cromwell’s cousin, who governed the island, held him in Carisbrooke Castle. After more negotiation, Parliament gave up in despair and, in January 1648, voted to make no more addresses to the king. The Scots, however, had continued to parley and, in December 1647, a group of conservative Covenanters signed an “Engagement” with Charles. In return for an army, he promised to establish Presbyterianism in England for three years. This led to a Second Civil War, comprising a series of Royalist revolts in the South, in Wales, and in Scotland. Unfortunately for the rebels, these revolts were not simultaneous, and Fairfax and Cromwell were largely able to mop up the English and Welsh outbreaks before marching north to subdue the Engagers. Any moderation shown toward the enemy during the First Civil War evaporated as Cromwell and his men now saw the Royalists as resisting the evident “Providences of God” revealed in the outcome of the earlier conflict. Some prisoners were summarily executed, and, ominously, both officers and soldiers began to refer to “Charles Stuart, that man of blood.” It was becoming clear that there would be no peace in England while the king lived.

The Presbyterian MPs, however, reached a quite different conclusion from the Second Civil War. Surely, now, chastened by a second defeat, Charles would be ready to negotiate? On the morning of December 5, 1648, Parliament voted 129–83 to resume discussions with the king. For the army, which had been forced to fight this king a second time, the vote was the last straw. The next morning, December 6, Colonel Thomas Pride (d. 1658) positioned his men outside the House of Commons, refused entrance to those who had voted for treating with the king, arrested some 45 of the Presbyterian leaders, and secluded another 186. A further 86 members protested this coup, which became known as Pride’s Purge, by withdrawing. Although many MPs later drifted back, this still left only about 200 MPs, less than half the original, to make up a reduced House of Commons; in fact, over the next few weeks, the fate of the Crown and nation would be decided by an average attendance of only about 70. Soon, the few remaining Lords ceased to attend their house. The resulting rump of a Parliament no longer represented even the original supporters of the parliamentary cause, let alone the entire kingdom.

But the Rump Parliament, as it soon came to be called, knew what it had to do. In January, it set up a High Court of Justice to try the king on a charge of high treason. This statement is, on the face of it, a logical absurdity. Allegiance in a monarchy is always paid to the person of the king. How could Charles have been guilty of treason against himself? They got around this problem by alleging that the king had violated not statute law or even common law but a more fundamental principle, part of the Ancient Constitution, as expressed in his coronation oath. The legislation establishing the court read as follows:

Whereas it is notorious that Charles Stuart, the now King of England ..., hath had a wicked design totally to subvert the ancient and fundamental laws and liberties of this nation, and in their place to introduce an arbitrary and tyrannical government, and that ... he hath prosecuted it with fire and sword, levied and maintained a cruel war in the land
against the Parliament and kingdom, whereby the country hath been miserably wasted, the public treasure exhausted, trade decayed, thousands of people murdered, and infinite other mischiefs committed.14

Put simply, the king was charged with committing treason against the Ancient Constitution and, by levying cruel war against them, the English people. This was, of course, a revolutionary idea. At its heart was a notion relatively new to early modern Europe: that the king had a responsibility not only to God but to the people over whom he ruled; that should he fail in that responsibility, he could be tried by the representatives of the people and, if found wanting, removed from office. These principles and their implications would have earth-shattering effects not only in England but abroad over the next century and a half.

In the meantime, King Charles could not, of course, agree. When the trial convened in Westminster Hall on January 20, 1649, he immediately went to the heart of the matter by questioning the court’s jurisdiction and refusing to plead. After all, the law, in a monarchy, is always the king’s law; the courts are his courts. How, therefore, could any court put the king on trial?

I would know by what authority – I mean lawful – there are many unlawful authorities in the world – thieves and robbers by the highways – but I would know by what authority I was brought from thence and carried from place to place, and I know not what. And when I know what lawful authority, I shall answer. Remember, I am your King – your lawful King.15

In fact, Parliament had already answered this: on 4 January they had resolved that “the people are, under God, the original of all just power; that the Commons of England, in parliament assembled, being chosen by and representing the people, have the supreme power in the nation.”16 This was parliamentary sovereignty, a flat denial of the divine right of kings. But it was every bit as fictional, as the king noted on the 22nd, in language oddly reminiscent of Colonel Rainsborough’s:

Certainly you never asked the question of the tenth man in the kingdom, and in this way you manifestly wrong even the poorest ploughman if you demand not his free consent; nor can you pretend any colour for this your pretended commission without the consent of the major part of every man in England of whatsoever quality or condition.17

Refusing to recognize the court’s authority, Charles stood or sat impassively and disdainfully, but with great dignity, as the prosecution sought to make its case. The spectacle must have been impressive: the largest medieval hall in England packed to the rafters with spectators. At its south end, on several tiers of red velvet benches sat the commissioners: assorted army officers, MPs, and gentlemen, presided over by a heretofore obscure judge, John Bradshaw (1602–59). Before them sat an array of lawyers and clerks, all in black. At the north end and in the upper galleries, crowds of spectators, held back by wooden rails and soldiers in their red coats. On the other side of a hastily constructed wooden partition, in a makeshift dock in the middle of the hall, the magnetic object of all eyes, a
solitary figure in black, but for the brilliant blue and silver of the Star and Garter – the king. Given his refusal to plead or make a case, the verdict was a foregone conclusion. King Charles was found guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors against the people of England. On January 27 he was condemned to death by beheading. At this point he demanded to speak, but Parliament was not about to let him do so now. Instead, 59 commissioners signed the most notorious death warrant in English history.

Years earlier, upon losing the first English Civil War, Charles I had stated “that if I cannot live as a king, I shall die like a gentleman.” He now set about to do precisely that. The night before his execution, the king burned his papers and saw his youngest children for the last time. The next morning, January 30, 1649, he rose and, after asking about the weather outside, put on an extra shirt for the walk across St. James’s Park to the scaffold: ever concerned with the dignity of his appearance, Charles did not want to create an impression of fear by shivering. He was escorted by armed guard through the park to the Banqueting House at Whitehall – one of those expensive building projects of his father’s which had so alienated the English taxpayer. One wonders what he thought as he walked through the hall under its magnificent ceiling – a depiction of his father’s apotheosis in heaven by Peter Paul Rubens – and thus the sort of expensive art project which had proved controversial in his own ill-fated reign. At the end of his walk was an open window facing west; outside it a scaffold draped in black, at the center of which was the block (see plate 16). Beyond and below stood a crowd of ordinary Londoners, held back by soldiers. The king emerged into the gray light of the January day and asked to speak, but, dogged by his weak voice and bad luck to the last, he was inaudible. He then turned to his archbishop of Canterbury, William Juxon (1582–1663), and remarked that the executioner sent him “from a corruptible to an incorruptible crown.” Turning back to the block, he knelt down, said a brief prayer, and, in a signal worked out with the henchman beforehand, stretched out his hands. The axe fell and, as was customary, the executioner raised the late king’s dismembered head for all to see. It is said that at this sight, which normally elicited cheers, the crowd uttered a deep groan.

And well they might, for the events of that January day would have grave consequences for all members of the English polity. For the first time in their history, the English people – or at least some English people – had judicially and publicly murdered their king. Such an act violated the Great Chain, Divine Right, and a thousand years of sermons and royal propaganda. And this was only the beginning of the demolition of the old world. On March 17, Parliament abolished the kingly office; two days later they abolished the House of Lords. And so, on May 19, 1649, England was declared a commonwealth, that is, a republic.

The Radical Hydra?

To the framers of the revolution, the clearing away of so much of the old order must have been exhilarating, opening up new possibilities for reform, even a
fundamental reconstruction of English society. But it was also frightening. Remember that according to the doctrine of the Great Chain, none of its links could be broken without incurring God’s wrath and political, social, and religious chaos. The problem for the gentry – or that part of it which supported the Rump – was to maintain the rest of the Chain and so prevent that chaos. Put another way, having engineered a revolution which benefited themselves, they now had to ensure that the revolution stopped before other groups sought the same benefits. Like Henry VIII throwing a man down from a high tower (see chapter 3), they had to make him stop before he hit the ground.

This would be all the more difficult because in opposing the king, the parliamentary gentry and urban oligarchy had been forced to do something unprecedented: to attract, rather than simply commandeer, the loyalties and assistance of the common people who had fought in the army and elsewhere. They had made the people partners in their revolution and, in the process, encouraged them to question and even overthrow authority. That questioning had been voiced in a relatively free press. Though Parliament appointed a government censor in 1643,
he only became effective once Cromwell became lord protector ten years later (see below). In the meantime, domestic newspapers appeared for the first time, and the number of political and religious pamphlets published each year mushroomed. One surviving collection alone, assembled by the London bookseller George Thomason (ca. 1602–66), holds nearly 23,000 items from 1641 to 1662. Most of these productions were traditional and conservative in sentiment: Charles I’s purported last thoughts and meditations, *Eikon Basilike* (1649), was a runaway best-seller. But many were not, and some expressed opinions that had never previously been allowed into print. John Milton celebrated this flowering of ideas in *Areopagitica* (1644), the classic defense of free speech. But social and religious conservatives were aghast. Presbyterian Thomas Edwards (ca. 1599–1648), in his encyclopedic *Gangraena* (1646), diagnosed these radical ideas as so many sicknesses of the body politic, deluding the people into claiming rights and embracing philosophies and lifestyles heretofore unknown.

In fact, it was only natural that ordinary people, having helped to dislodge the top of a centuries-old hierarchical structure, would question why they should have to stay at the bottom. Put simply, the common farmers and artisans who made up the victorious parliamentary armies now wanted a piece of the pie; or, to use a more contemporary metaphor, having unseated one rider, they did not want to hoist another on their backs. This feeling could only have been exacerbated by current economic and social conditions. The harvests of 1649–51 were as bad as those of the 1590s; taxes were higher than they had ever been under Charles I; plague and disease ran rampant, spread, ironically, by the very army which had been formed to protect the people’s liberties.

The army spread not only disease but also, on a more positive note, Leveller ideas about political change. After the king’s trial and execution, the possibilities for radical reform seemed especially promising. One leading Leveller, John Lilburne (1615–57), made a career out of provoking the government with his incessant calls for a wider franchise, religious toleration, free speech, law reform, and individual rights, all of which he summarized in one ringing, radical phrase: “the Sovereignty of the People.” On occasion, several thousand Londoners, men and women, would take to the streets wearing Leveller-green ribbons, demanding these rights, or sign petitions for the release of Lilburne and other imprisoned Levellers. But the Leveller moment was urban-based and short-lived. In the spring of 1649 the Rump suppressed a second round of army agitation by arresting the Leveller leaders, executing the leading agitators, and buying off the rank-and-file by paying some arrears. Lilburne spent most of the next decade in prison or exile before dying in 1657, convinced that “posterity … shall reap the benefit of our endeavours, what ever shall become of us.” In fact, Leveller arguments would take centuries to bear fruit and some remain so radical as to be unrealized today. But the fact that they could be aired at all reveals that the revolution’s framers had opened a Pandora’s box of new ideas when they deposed the king. This becomes even clearer if we look at religion.

Here, too, the Long Parliament’s abolition of censorship, and with it the temporal power of the English clergy, was crucial. Remember that it was only in the previous hundred years that the English people had been allowed to read the Bible
at all; now, for the first time, they could interpret it from the pulpit and in print without fear of persecution. Admittedly, the increasingly conservative Presbyterian majority in the Rump Parliament made some attempt to enforce Kirk-like religious discipline on England. In 1645 the Westminster Assembly of Divines had agreed on a Presbyterian-style church government and a Directory of Worship to supercede the Book of Common Prayer. But the new regime never worked out adequate mechanisms of enforcement, persecution, or censorship and these were effectively opposed by the parliamentary Independents, who sought toleration for virtually all Protestant beliefs. The Independents, including Cromwell, embraced the revolutionary notion that it was not necessary for everyone to agree on the details of religion in order to be good Christians and worthy citizens. Like modern Congregationalists, they found more truth in the spirit, among individuals and small congregations, than in a national Church or the decrees of the Rump or Westminster Assembly. In fact this tendency was a necessary implication of the Protestant, and especially the Puritan, mindset. After all, if all men (and, for some, women) could read the Bible; if God desired a priesthood of all believers; and if all were equal in sin, who could say whose interpretation was right? In September 1650 the Independents in Parliament secured repeal of the statutes compelling Sunday attendance at the (State) parish church.

This new-found freedom of thought, speech, and print resulted in a proliferation of unorthodox interpretations of the Bible and strains of Puritanism, many of which sought to apply ancient Scriptural injunctions to contemporary social realities. Some had longstanding antecedents; all were controversial. For example, the Baptists or “Dippers” could trace their ancestry to the German Anabaptists from a century earlier. They believed that baptism should be delayed until adulthood, when a rational person could make a free choice of his or her beliefs. Reasonable as this may sound, many contemporaries found it outrageous to rear children without baptism into a Christian faith. Moreover, adult baptism implied separation of Church and State, since the former would be limited to true believers. This was the antithesis of the mandatory State Church urged by those still loyal to the pre-war Church of England (hereafter called Anglicans) and Presbyterians.

And yet, the Baptists were, in many ways, the most moderate of the sects emerging into the sunlight of toleration in the 1640s and 1650s. Related to the Baptists were the Seekers, who sampled church after church in search of truth and, presumably, a final confessional allegiance. More alarming were the Diggers, who could find no Biblical authorization for private property and the accumulation of riches. Their leader, Gerrard Winstanley (1609–76), anticipated later socialists by urging the wealthy to give up their property and share it in common with their fellow Christians. One can imagine what the landed gentry or even minor freeholders thought of this! The Diggers attempted to put their beliefs into practice by establishing communes of sorts at St. George’s Hill in Surrey and elsewhere, but these collapsed due to bad weather and the hostility of local landowners. Yet another group sought neither political nor economic change but a revolution of the spirit: the Ranters believed that, since God was present in all things, and He
was obviously without sin, sin could not exist. In any case, according to the Ranter Abiezer Coppe (1619–72?), “to the pure all things are pure.” That is, Ranters gave free rein to individual conscience in deciding questions of right or wrong. In the words of Laurence Clarkson (1615–67),

There is no such act as drunkenness, adultery and theft in God…. Sin hath its conception only in the imagination…. What act soever is done by thee in light and love, is light and lovely, though it be that act called adultery…. No matter what Scripture, saints or churches say, if that within thee do not condemn thee, thou shalt not be condemned.

The Ranters, reacting to centuries of tight social control and repression of individuality, reveled in “freedom of the spirit.” As might be expected, every other group reacted in horror at the Ranter program, and the “Ranter moment” of 1649 was followed in 1650 by harsh repression and statutes making blasphemy and adultery capital crimes.

Even more alarming – in part because more numerous – was the Society of Friends, or, as they were popularly known, the Quakers. Quakers believed that each person possessed an inner light, the Holy Spirit, or the spirit of Christ. In their view, this inner light was invariably correct and to be obeyed over the dictates of the State, the Church, even Scripture. Moreover, they believed that every person had God’s inner light in equal measure. “Every person” meant, of course, king and commoner, landlord and tenant, master and apprentice, man and woman. This led Quakers to refuse to acknowledge earthly authorities like the State, the courts, or their social superiors; indeed, they publicly stressed God’s impending vengeance on “the great ones of the earth.” They manifested their disdain for the prevailing social order by refusing to pay tithes, swear oaths, doff their caps, or bow to those superiors. Moreover, while women played an important role in most of the sects, they were especially prominent in Quakerism: possessing God’s inner light as amply as men did, they participated fully in Quaker services; some went out into the world to preach, in violation of all contemporary gender norms. Finally, Quaker services themselves scandalized hostile observers, for the inner light compelled the Friends to sing, rant, “quake,” and move about in a trance-like state during their ecstatic communion with the deity. Some went farther, going “naked as a sign” or violently shouting down rival preachers (pacifism would only be adopted as a Quaker ideal during the 1660s, after a decade of harsh repression). In 1656, James Nayler (1618–60), a founder of the Quaker movement, reenacted Christ’s entry into Jerusalem by riding through the streets of Bristol on an ass. Nayler clearly meant his performance to symbolize Christ’s presence in all human beings, but Parliament saw it as “horrid blasphemy” and a sign of growing disorder. They decreed that he be pilloried in London, whipped through the streets of Bristol, his tongue pierced with a hot iron, his forehead branded with a “B” (for blasphemer), and, finally, put to death. Although Cromwell, by then lord protector, would not allow his execution, the savagery of this sentence indicates just how frightened the ruling elite were by the specter of Quakerism.
Nayler’s entry into Bristol also suggests a strong millenarian aspect to these movements. That is, many of them, applying Old Testament prophecies and the Book of Revelation to recent, earth-shattering events, had concluded that the thousand-year reign of the anti-christ was ending, and the beginning of the end of the world was near. One group believed that Lodowick Muggleton (1609–98), a tailor from the West Country who had experienced a series of religious visions, was the last prophet named in Revelation. Muggletonians believed that he had the power to save or damn on the spot, which he did publicly – when not imprisoned for blasphemy – throughout the 1650s. But most radical and frightening of all to conservatives were the Fifth Monarchy Men. This group believed, in common with most people in the seventeenth century, that all legislative power was God’s. But the conclusion they drew from this position was that the legal profession should be abolished and all legislation should be Biblical, specifically based on the Mosaic law articulated in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. They argued, on this basis, that moral offenses were as serious as civil ones, advocating, for example, the stoning of adulterers. Finally, following Daniel 7, they believed that the Bible had foretold five great monarchies. Four had, according to their interpretation, already risen and fallen: those of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The fifth would undoubtedly be that of “King Jesus,” whose return they thought imminent after the execution of King Charles. They were prepared to hasten this Second Coming by force if necessary. For a brief moment, around 1653, this group had extensive political influence; Fifth Monarchist Major-General Thomas Harrison (1616–60) had the ear of important politicians like Cromwell and wielded vast clerical patronage.

It should be obvious that a free press and religious toleration had, predictably, led to religious diversity or, in contemporary eyes, chaos. It should also be obvious that these religious ideas had political and social implications and that all three, when added together, were the ruling elite’s worst nightmare. Where religion had once been one of the principal props of law and order and the status quo, it now seemed to justify, even demand from its followers, civil disobedience and radical change. Suddenly, extreme Puritanism’s emphasis on individual conscience, which had so alarmed Queen Elizabeth and her Stuart successors, was beginning to frighten moderate Protestant country gentlemen as well. As a consequence, the idea of a single established Church with the power to coerce conformity began to look good to them. In the end, the radical ideas of the Levellers and the sects proved to be too much for the landed gentry and urban oligarchy. They had had enough of revolution – if they had ever approved of it. Increasingly, they yearned for the kind of political and social stability which they had enjoyed under the monarchy – without the monarchy itself. They would spend more than a decade searching for it.

Commonwealth, Protectorate, and the Search for Stability, 1649–58

The Commonwealth, or government by the Rump, lasted from 1649 to 1653. By the end, it proved too conservative for the radicals and too radical for the ruling class. More specifically, it was too tolerant of the lower orders for the landed
gentry; too Presbyterian for the Independent sects; and too tolerant of the sects for the Presbyterians and die-hard Anglicans. Its continued sequestration of Royalist lands raised badly needed cash, but never enough, and at the price of continued disaffection from that quarter. Above all, the new regime never effectively mastered the army. The easiest way for the Rump to become popular was to lower taxes, but the only way to do that was to disband the army. To disband the army, Parliament would have had to pay its arrears; but to do that it would have had to raise taxes! Since the Rump could do none of these things it remained unpopular – and thus utterly dependent upon the army for its continued existence. No one – not Holles and the Presbyterians in 1647, not the Rump 1649–53, not even Cromwell nor his son 1653–9 – would solve this conundrum. The Commonwealth would prove more successful with the Irish Confederates and Scots Covenanters, but at tremendous cost in money, blood, and bitterness.

Once the business of the king’s execution had been dispatched, the Rump sought to kill two additional birds with one stone by sending the army overseas to deal with the Irish rebels. While the English were forging their revolution, Gaelic and Old English Catholic Confederates had joined forces with Protestant Royalists under Ormond to seize control of Ireland. Cromwell and the New Model Army landed in August 1649 and began to take the island back town by town, starting just north of Dublin (see map 7, p. 86). Within two months, they had taken Drogheda and Wexford, putting to the sword Catholic priests and any combatant who had refused an earlier opportunity to surrender. In the first siege, they did so on the orders of their general; in the second, they simply ran amok. Cromwell’s pronouncement on his slaughtered enemies was characteristically sanctimonious: “I am persuaded that this is a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood.” In other words, the massacre of some 3,500 Catholic townspeople in 1649 was supposed to be revenge for the atrocities visited on New English settlers during the rebellion of 1641. Never mind the fact that the 1641 rebels had been Gaelic and Drogheda was Old English! The English rarely bothered with the subtleties of the Irish situation – and, as a consequence, continually mistook it. The massacres were also effective acts of terrorism, calculated to “prevent the effusion of blood for the future” by convincing the rebels to submit, and several towns capitulated soon thereafter. This was only the beginning: throughout early 1650 Cromwellian troops practiced a policy of scorched earth in Ireland, burning the crops and evicting natives, leading to the death by starvation and other causes of at least 200,000 and possibly as many as 600,000 in a total population of 2 million. Still, it took three years to subdue the Catholic armies. Once this was accomplished, the government resumed plantation, confiscating land from Catholics and selling it to Protestant soldiers and adventurers. Some 40,000 Catholic landowners and their families were evicted from their land and forced to move to the stony, infertile west of the island. Catholics were banned from walled towns, forcing many merchants to flee the island. Identified rebels were enslaved and sent to the West Indies; others were allowed to leave to join foreign armies. In 1641 Catholics had owned 60 percent of the land in Ireland; by the late 1650s that
percentage had fallen to less than 10. The result left Ireland firmly in Protestant-Parliamentarian hands, but it also further embittered not only the Gaelic inhabitants of the island but also the formerly loyalist Old English.

Having brought Ireland to heel, Cromwell next dealt with Royalist rebellion in Scotland. In 1649–50, the Scots, horrified at the execution of Charles I, declared for his son, whom they proclaimed King Charles II – of Great Britain. In return, he repudiated his Church of England upbringing and agreed to the Covenant. Young Charles's claim to rule the entire island challenged the Commonwealth. Once again, the New Model Army had to be called upon to remind everyone who had won the Civil Wars. Fairfax, who had opposed the king's execution, resigned rather than invade Scotland, so it fell to Cromwell to plead with the Scots: “I beseech you in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.”

(Clearly, he had more time for debate with fellow Protestants than with the Catholic Irish.) On September 3, 1650 he defeated the Covenanter army at Dunbar, in Scotland (see map 11). One year later to the very day he defeated a second invading force made up of Royalists and moderate Presbyterians under Charles himself, at Worcester in England (map 11). These victories finally sealed Parliament's triumph in the Civil Wars and left the Royalist and Scottish forces in disarray for a decade. As for the young “king,” he was forced to hide in an oak tree (which would forever after be commemorated in British pub signs as “the Royal Oak”). Eventually, disguised and covertly assisted by a network of mainly Catholic families, Charles made his way to the continent. He would spend the next decade as the impoverished and harried guest of a variety of European rulers. He kept a small, shabby, peripatetic court populated by Royalist exiles and hang-ers-on who plotted with sympathizers in England to engineer a restoration. These plots were all doomed to failure, partly because neither the English people nor the continental powers had much will to restore the Stuarts, partly because the Commonwealth had infiltrated the Royalist court with spies.

Pacifying Ireland and Scotland should have bolstered the prestige of the Commonwealth. To an extent it did. Some Royalists and Covenanters now resigned themselves to rule by the Rump, taking an oath to be “faithful” to the English government “without a King or House of Lords.” This should, in turn, have enabled the Rump to enact the real reforms for which the Independents and the army had fought. As Cromwell, in one of his progressive moods, urged them after Dunbar, “relieve the oppressed, hear the groans of the poor prisoners ..., be pleased to reform the abuses of the professions; and if there be any one that makes many poor to make a few rich, that suits not a commonwealth.”

The Rump made some attempt to do all these things. For example, in 1650–1, it sought to improve the economy by encouraging trade. It passed the first of the Navigation Acts which forbade foreign powers from trading with England’s American colonies and required all such trade to be carried in English merchant ships with crews that were at least 75 percent English. The Rump also pursued reform of the law courts, the Poor Law, the clergy, and the moral character of the nation, passing harsh statutes against adultery, fornication, blasphemy, and swearing. Finally, its administration was more efficient and less corrupt than its Stuart counterpart.
In the long run, the Navigation Acts would revolutionize English colonial trade by protecting it from foreign competition while breaking the old system of trading monopolies. But in the short run they led to a trade war with the Dutch which the Commonwealth could ill afford, coming on the heels of the expensive Irish and Scottish campaigns. Lawyers and JPs held up legal and Poor Law reform as these promised to adversely affect their interests; while religious reform proved unpopular and unenforceable – the abolition of Christmas because of its pagan trappings was, unsurprisingly, a non-starter. In the end, the Rump’s record left many disillusioned, especially in the army.

In the spring of 1653 the Rump alienated its protectors further by considering a reduction in pay for the New Model Army and taking forever to dissolve itself and call new elections. Finally, on April 20, Oliver Cromwell, exasperated, entered the House with soldiers and dissolved the Rump:

[He] told the House, that they had sat long enough … that some of them were whores-masters … that others of them were drunkards, and some corrupt and unjust men and scandalous to the profession of the gospel, and that it was not fit that they should sit as a parliament any longer.28

Perhaps more telling, no one rose up to defend them; in Cromwell’s stinging recollection “when they were dissolved, there was not so much as the barking of a dog.”29

The Rump’s demise provided the army officers, most of whom were Independents, with the chance to nominate a legislature of their own liking. The result was sometimes called an “Assembly of Saints,” though it has come to be popularly known as “Barebone’s Parliament” after Praise-God Barebone (ca. 1598–1679/80), a London leather-seller and preacher who became a member. As this implies, some of its members belonged to radical sects, including the Baptists and Fifth Monarchy Men, and hoped to usher in God’s kingdom on earth. To the extent that these zealots came to dominate its proceedings, Barebone’s Parliament turned into a disaster, for they were long on ambitious plans, short on practical political experience. For example, following the lead of the Fifth Monarchy Men, one faction advocated replacing English common law with the law of Moses. While this Parliament passed some enlightened legislation to establish new procedures for the registration of births, marriages, and deaths, probate of wills, relief of creditors, and the incarceration of lunatics, its members also offended important segments of the country by seeking to abolish or reform the court of Chancery (upsetting lawyers), lay patronage of Church livings and purchase of tithes (upsetting landowners), and the collection of the Excise and monthly assessments (upsetting army officers). Cromwell, who was by now the most powerful man in the country, reacted with disgust, complaining that where before he had to deal with knaves, now he had to deal with fools. The godly reformer in him had initially welcomed the “Saints.” But the hard-headed country gentleman realized that government required prudence and practicality as well as religious enthusiasm and godliness. The rest of the ruling elite were coming to agree. In December,
Cromwell’s supporters in the Assembly engineered their dissolution, fittingly, while the most godly members were attending a prayer meeting!

Who would rule next? On December 12, 1653 an army delegation presented to General Cromwell the only written constitution ever implemented in England, the Instrument of Government. This named Cromwell as executive, giving him the title “lord protector.” Who was this man who had begun life “by birth a gentleman, living neither in any considerable height, nor yet in obscurity,” rising – as he saw it, through God’s “dispensations” – to equal any king? Oliver (see plate 17), a distant relative of Henry VIII’s minister Thomas Cromwell, was born in 1599 in tiny East Anglian Huntingdonshire. He was educated at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, a hotbed of Puritan thought. Still, he would have spent his life as an anonymous country gentleman of godly propensities and middling estate if the
Civil War, Revolution, and the Search for Stability, 1642–1660

War had not uncovered his leadership ability and tactical skill, propelling him to the center of national affairs. Once it did so, his repeated successes convinced him that God had a special purpose for him. This is not to say that Cromwell was always sure of himself. Over the next decade he would sometimes be torn between the conservative instincts of an English landed gentleman and a Puritan zeal for godly reform in Church and State. However, once his mind was made up, his conviction of being God’s instrument became his greatest strength. Ironically, King Charles had, as we have seen, the same certainty of divine favor and purpose. But there was one significant difference between Charles I and Oliver Cromwell: Cromwell had a killer instinct. It was this killer instinct, along with his propensity for seizing the main chance, that enraged his enemies, whether Royalists, the Irish, or even former allies like the Levellers.

Advising Cromwell would be a Council of State, filled by generals and the protector’s nominees, which would share control of the government’s finances and armed forces. Legislation was to be made by a parliament elected every three years by those with estates worth over £200 a year. This was a far stiffer property qualification than the old franchise – an indication of just how conservative the ruling class had grown in the four years since the abolition of the monarchy. In fact, if this constitution looks suspiciously like the old one, with Parliament, Privy Council, and “king” in all but name, that was no accident. The only major difference, apart from the franchise, was that this time the ruler’s power would be backed up by a standing army. It was therefore little wonder that radicals viewed Cromwell’s acceptance of the Instrument of Government as a great betrayal; or that most members of the ruling elite – even Royalists – accommodated themselves to it.

Oliver Cromwell ruled as lord protector of England (and Wales), Scotland, and Ireland for a little under five years. In many ways, his regime contrasted favorably with that of the early Stuarts. It provided rational, efficient government with a minimum of corruption. It launched much needed law reform and sought to make education more accessible. It pursued a broadly tolerant religious policy which prescribed worship according to the Directory, but allowed for much individuality of practice among congregations. (Ironically, this led to great tensions within congregations as each tried to reach consensus on practice.) The regime did not tolerate Anglicans, Ranters, or Catholics, but left adherents of the old Prayer Book and even those of the pope to live in peace if they would live peacefully. The regime also allowed Jews to return to England for the first time since their official expulsion in 1290. It pursued an aggressive and largely successful economic and foreign policy. As we have seen, the Commonwealth’s Navigation Acts provoked a trade war with the Dutch which the Cromwellian regime won in 1654. Convinced of God’s favor, Cromwell next devised the Western Design to “liberate” Spain’s Caribbean colonies. This was, at best, a draw: a crushing defeat at Santo Domingo was only partly balanced by the acquisition of the not-yet-lucrative island of Jamaica in 1655. After striking an alliance with the French in 1657, Anglo-French forces won several victories against Spain in Flanders and at sea. The navy also safeguarded Mediterranean trade by attacking Royalist and Barbary pirates. Thus, English soldiers, sailors, and merchants finally had their aggressive
But there were costs to such “big-government” successes. First, a more efficient government was bound to be more intrusive. The failed Western Design had necessitated the impressment of thousands of unwilling volunteers. In 1655, after an unsuccessful Royalist rising, Cromwell attempted to ensure local control by dividing the country into 12 military districts, each overseen by a major-general. Not unlike lords lieutenant, the major-generals enforced law and order, the Poor Law, and religious toleration; but they also spied on Royalists and Presbyterians, bullied JPs, and purged corporations of anyone suspected of disloyalty to the regime. In keeping with Puritan conviction that God’s judgment on the nation could only be averted by its moral reform, many major-generals also fought drunkenness, blasphemy, swearing, gambling, whoring, and indecent fashions wherever they found them. They also suppressed alehouses, playhouses, Sunday sports, and Christmas celebrations. Needless to say, the Protectorate did not succeed in stamping out any of these practices or institutions, but it did leave a lasting impression nevertheless. The major-generals and their Puritan supporters would long be remembered as prudes, kill-joys, and intruders into local communities, while standing armies generally would be associated with the oppression of English liberties, local autonomy, and even harmless fun.

The Protectorate was also expensive. A more efficient government, policing the nation at home and prosecuting war abroad via a standing army and permanent navy, had to be paid for. The average annual expenditure of the Cromwellian administration was nearly £2 million – far greater than that of Elizabeth I, James I, or Charles I at their respective heights. This necessitated, in turn, very high tax rates. Naturally, Cromwell continued the lucrative but unpopular Excise and monthly assessments and even extended the former. His government also sequestered Royalist lands, selling some and forcing proprietors to compound for (pay a high fee to reoccupy) others. None of this did anything for the regime’s popularity or the protector’s ability to get along with a parliament full of landowners who had to answer to other landowners back home. As a result, like his royal predecessors, he frequently found it necessary to prorogue or dismiss the Honorable Gentlemen.

This should sound familiar. If Oliver Cromwell looks, in retrospect, very much like a king without a crown, his followers would have agreed. In 1657 they sought, via a document entitled The Humble Petition and Advice, to rectify the omission by offering him the title of king and the power to appoint both his successor and the members of an “Other” or “Upper House,” obviously resembling the House of Lords. Cromwell refused the title but accepted the powers along with reinstatement as protector, complete with a gold scepter and purple and ermine robe. It should be obvious that after nearly 30 years of constitutional experimentation, 10 of them without a king, many in the ruling elite longed for the old structures (and strictures). This became even clearer after Cromwell’s sudden death from pneumonia and overwork on September 3, 1658. Like a king, he was given an
elaborate State funeral patterned on that of his Stuart predecessors. Like a Crown prince, his eldest surviving son, Richard (1626–1712), was allowed to succeed to the position of lord protector.

The Restoration, 1658–60

Richard Cromwell’s smooth accession suggested that Oliver had left the Protectorate secure. But the new protector inherited three peoples divided in politics and religion and a regime both financially exhausted and increasingly unpopular. The nobility and gentry, in particular, resented not only the Protectorate’s tax burden but also the usurpation of their former place as the State’s representatives in the localities by Puritan nonentities. When not oppressed by the major-generals, they feared the breakdown of social and religious order described in the previous section. In short, the ruling elite had had their fill of godly reformation, whether purveyed by wild-eyed preachers, independent congregations, saintly parliaments, or oppressive armies. Increasingly, and somewhat myopically, the country – or at least the traditional ruling class – began to long for the good old days under the Stuarts. Only a man of strength and conviction like Oliver Cromwell could have held the nation together and maintained his regime in power under such circumstances.

Unfortunately for that regime, Richard was no Oliver. Richard Cromwell was, in fact, an intelligent, amiable, thoroughly decent man who would soon lose control of events. In the spring of 1659 Parliament attempted to assert its authority over the Council of the Army. This led the army to force another dissolution of parliament, banish Richard into retirement, and recall the 78 surviving members of the Rump. The Rump, quite naturally, also sought to control the army, which, true to form, sent it packing on October 13, 1659. The diarist John Evelyn (1620–1706) expressed the general feeling of uncertainty when he wrote: “The army now turned out the Parliament…. We had now no government in the nation, all in confusion; no magistrate either owned or pretended, but the soldiers and they not agreed: God Almighty have mercy on, and settle us.” In late October, a Committee of Public Safety headed by General Charles Fleetwood (ca. 1618–92) established, in effect, rule by the Grandees. But most of the generals appointed didn’t even bother showing up. By Christmas Fleetwood had thrown up his hands and resigned power back to the Rump. At this point, General George Monck (1608–70), the ranking commander in Scotland, began to march south with the only fully paid army in the British Isles. No one knew what he would do but each group – Republican, Royalist, Presbyterian, Independent – seems to have hoped that he was one of them.

He reached London in February 1660. After some vacillation, on February 11 he ordered the Rump to call for immediate elections, thereby dissolving itself, with or without the return of the members secluded in 1648. The populace greeted this news with joy – expressed that night by the roasting of rump steaks in the streets of London. The secluded members returned on February 21 and, on
March 16, the full Long Parliament ordered new elections and dissolved itself. Simultaneously, the exiled Prince Charles, sensing his moment, and hoping to sway the election, issued from the continent the Declaration of Breda. This promised amnesty to all who had participated in the Civil Wars apart from those to be excepted by Parliament; liberty “to tender consciences” (freedom of religion), also subject to parliamentary approval; and the recognition of all land sales since 1642. These provisions were designed to allay fears that a restoration would bring political, religious, or economic revenge. Thus, Charles sought to begin the healing of old wounds and to present himself as a consensus choice who would be fair to all, not just former Royalists.

It worked. The Parliament elected in April 1660, known as the Convention Parliament because no monarch had convened it, was overwhelmingly moderate in composition. That is, it was dominated by Royalists and Presbyterians, the latter of whom now supported the Stuarts as their best hope to restore order and good government. When Parliament met at the end of the month, it issued an invitation for the exiled prince to return as sovereign. It proclaimed him on 8 May and dispatched a fleet to bring the nation’s favorite son home. On May 29, 1660, coincidentally his birthday, King Charles II (reigned 1660–85) entered London accompanied by Monck, newly created duke of Albemarle and master of the Horse, as well as aristocratic supporters, both old and new. This time, Evelyn wrote far more optimistically, even triumphantly:

This day came in his Majesty, Charles the 2d to London after a sad and long exile, and calamitous suffering both of the King and Church: being 17 years. This was also his birthday, and with a triumph of above 20,000 horse and foot, brandishing their swords and shouting with unexpressable joy: the ways strewed with flowers, the bells ringing, the streets hung with tapestry, fountains running with wine: the mayor, aldermen, and all the companies in their liveries, chains of gold, banners; Lords and nobles, cloth of silver, gold, and velvet everybody clad in, the windows and balconies all set with ladies, trumpets, music, and myriads of people flocking the streets and was as far as Rochester, so as they were 7 hours in passing the city.

As described above and depicted in a contemporary print (see plate 18), it was as if the Great Chain of Being had not only been restored but was laid out in person, horizontally, end to end, from Rochester to London, in all its glory. No wonder that Evelyn, a devout member of the Church of England and a landed gentleman who had lost much during the preceding revolution, wrote, “I stood in the Strand, and beheld it, and blessed God.” The old order was restored, the clock turned back. The people of England had experienced a long national nightmare, a winter of profound discontent which had reached its nadir on a cold January day in 1649. They now awakened in springtime to find themselves in love with their new, young sovereign of the old Stuart line.

Or did they? Could the English really “go home again”? Could either Charles Stuart or the people who now embraced him with open arms ever entirely forget that they had publicly vilified and executed the last Charles Stuart, his father; broken the Great Chain; smashed the Tudor–Stuart constitution in Church and...
State; tried out several new forms of government, a free press, and religious
toleration; and considered unorthodox social and religious systems? Could the
English constitution and the people it was meant to govern really go back to
1603, or 1625, or even 1641? Could they forget the many years when the House
of Commons had ruled on its own – effectively, if tyrannically – without king,
lords, or bishops? Put another way, had the Civil Wars and Restoration really
done anything to solve the problems that had led to them, those of sovereignty,
finance, foreign policy, religion, and local control? The answers to these questions
were uncertain on that brilliant May day in 1660. In fact, they would take most
of the next half-century to be resolved.