



What kind of ruler was Oliver Cromwell?

Case study 1: Cromwell in his own words


One obvious way to try and understand the puzzle of Oliver Cromwell is to look at his own words. We are lucky that there is a collection of his speeches and letters. See what they tell you about him.



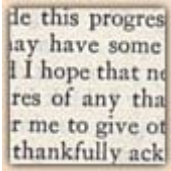
Order from Cromwell to the Tower of London, 1654



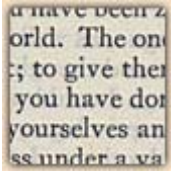
Order about publication of pamphlets, 1654




Document appointing a Major General, 1655



Cromwell's reply when asked to be king, 1657



Speech on the Humble Petition and Advice, 1657



Cromwell's thoughts about his job, April 1657

Case study 1: Cromwell in his own words – Source 1

An order from Cromwell to the officer in charge of the Tower of London, 1 December 1654

(W.C. Abbott (ed.), *The writings and speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, Vol. III, p.522. Published by Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1947)

What is this source?

This is an order sent by Oliver Cromwell to the commander in charge of the Tower of London.

The Tower of London was a military base, but it was also a prison. Political prisoners were usually kept there.

What's the background to this source?

At the time this source was written Cromwell had been in power almost a year. Although he had a lot of supporters, Cromwell also had plenty of enemies. There were various plots against him and attempts on his life. For example, John Gerard tried to kill him in May 1654.

We do not know a great deal about the men mentioned in this document. Naudin was imprisoned in May 1654. Lee was put in the Tower in February 1654. The authorities said that both Lee and Richard Dutton should be banished from the kingdom, but it appears Cromwell did not do this. The Council referred to in the document was the Council of State. Cromwell ruled like a monarch, but as Lord Protector he did have to work with the Council of State. Parliament did not control this Council, but it did provide several of its members.

It's worth knowing that ...

It was quite common for rulers to execute people accused of treason, or at least to hold them without trial. On the other hand, it was also quite common to release suspects and keep an eye on them. Cromwell was no harsher than other rulers.

Cromwell was extremely aware of plots against himself and his rule. His main concern was with plots by 'enemies' of the country such as Catholics and foreign powers. His government had a good intelligence service to guard against these threats.

Your turn: What can we learn from this source?

1. What orders did Cromwell give?
2. What did the men in the Tower have to do?
3. How does this source help us to understand attitudes towards Cromwell's rule?
4. Does this source provide convincing evidence that Cromwell was generous and merciful towards his enemies?
5. What overall impression does this source give of Cromwell?

Source 1

*To Our trusty and well beloved John Barkstead, Esq., Lieutenant
of Our Tower of London*
OLIVER P.
Our will and pleasure is that you forthwith discharge and set at liberty the
bodies of Theodore Naudin,²⁰² John Jenkins, Roger Lee,²⁰³ Thomas Smith
and Dutton²⁰⁴ now prisoners under your charge in Our Tower of London,
you taking good and sufficient security that the said several persons and every
of them respectively shall appear before Our Council at Whitehall within six
months after summons in that behalf, and that they or any of them shall not
act anything against, or prejudicial to Us, or the Commonwealth, and for so
doing this shall be your warrant.
Given at Whitehall the first day of December 1654.²⁰⁵

Case study 1: Cromwell in his own words – Source 2

An order from Cromwell about the publication of pamphlets, 29 November 1654

(W.C. Abbott (ed.), *The writings and speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, Vol. III, p.522. Published by Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1947)

What is this source?

This is an order sent by Oliver Cromwell to Edward Dendy, Sergeant at Arms.

This officer was responsible for law and order in the city of London.

What's the background to this source?

The events in this document show why Cromwell often found himself torn in half. Cromwell thought people should be able to exchange ideas about politics and religion. He thought that this was a way for the population to become more religious and godly. On the other hand, he would not put up with attacks on his authority.

In the years before the Civil Wars there was strict censorship in Britain. It was dangerous to come up with new ideas about religion or politics. It was even more dangerous to try to spread those ideas in pamphlets. During the Civil Wars those controls collapsed. New ideas were spread widely through cheap pamphlets run off on printing presses. By the time Cromwell took power these pamphlets were common and many of them attacked him.

It's worth knowing that ...

There were so many different political and religious views in Cromwell's time that it was difficult not to be criticised by someone.

- Some religious hard-liners felt Cromwell did not do enough to make England a more godly place. Others felt Cromwell went too far!
- Some wanted the monarchy restored. Most of the army was opposed to the return of the monarchy.
- Most MPs were more worried than Cromwell by people questioning the way religion and politics was organised. They usually wanted harsher restrictions than Cromwell.



- There were also pamphlets praising Cromwell.

Your turn: What can we learn from this source?

1. What orders did Cromwell give?
2. What did the Sergeant at Arms have to do?
3. What does this source tell us about opposition to Cromwell?
4. Do you think Cromwell's main concern about the pamphlets really was that they dishonoured the nation and disturbed the peace?
5. What overall impression does this source give of Cromwell?

Source 2

*To Edward Dendy, Esq. Serjeant at Arms, or his
Deputy or Deputies*

OLIVER P.

Whereas several scandalous and seditious pamphlets are from time to time published to the great dishonour of this nation, and the disturbance of the peace thereof, And We being informed that certain pamphlets of that nature have been, and now are about to be printed by several persons within the City of London, and the liberties thereof, These are therefore to will and require you forthwith to repair to the dwelling, or work houses of all such printers within the said City and liberties as you shall suspect to have lately printed or to be upon the printing of such pamphlets as aforesaid, and them, and every of them forthwith to apprehend and bring in safe custody before Our Council at Whitehall. And you are to seize upon and bring away the several presses and all such the said pamphlets and other papers whatsoever that are any way prejudicial to Us or the State, and in order thereunto You are hereby authorized to break open any locks or bolts whatsoever.

Case study 1: Cromwell in his own words – Source 3

A document making Colonel William Boteler a Major General, October 1655

(W.C. Abbott (ed.), *The writings and speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, Vol. III, pp.849-50. Published by Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1947)

What is this source?

This is part of a document appointing Colonel William Boteler as a Major General.

It set out what authority he had and also the duties he had to carry out. It put him in charge of several counties in England.

What's the background to this source?

Cromwell became Lord Protector in December 1653. He hoped to make Britain an orderly place and put an end to all the wars and fighting over religion and political views. He tried to work with MPs to achieve this. However, he found this difficult and dismissed the first Protectorate Parliament in January 1655. To help him rule, he appointed eleven army commanders (Major Generals) from August 1655.

He put them in charge of particular parts of the country. Their job was to keep the country secure from enemies. They also ran everyday affairs like collecting taxes and keeping order.

It's worth knowing that ...

Cromwell appointed the Major Generals soon after he had news of a major defeat by the Spanish in July 1655. He felt that this defeat was God punishing him for not trying to make England a more religious, godly place.

Like Cromwell, the Major Generals were committed Puritans (hard-line Protestants). Part of their job was to try and make England more godly. They clamped down on what they considered to be rowdy behaviour (such as heavy drinking, music, dancing and fairs). They even tried to stop Christmas celebrations. Not surprisingly, the rule of the Major Generals was not popular.



Your turn: What can we learn from this source?

1. What powers did the new Major General have?
2. According to this source, what threats did Cromwell's Protectorate face?
3. How would you describe the approach taken towards enemies of Cromwell?
4. What overall impression does this source give of Cromwell?

Source 3

with the advice of Our Council assigned, made, constituted, and ordained, and by these presents do assign, make, constitute and ordain you to be Major General and Commander-in-Chief within the said Counties of Northampton, Huntingdon, Rutland and Bedford and all corporate and privilege places within the limits and precincts of the same, as well within Liberties as without; and do by these presents give full power and authority unto you to take into your charge, and to train, exercise, command, and keep in good discipline the said Militia Forces, and such others as shall be raised or assigned to you within the said Counties; And also to conduct and lead them against all and singular

enemies, rebels, traitors, and other offenders and their adherents against Us, and this Commonwealth. And with the said traitors, enemies, and rebels to fight, and them to invade, resist, repress and subdue, slay, kill, and put to execution of death by all ways and means according to your good discretion. And further We do hereby by the advice aforesaid give unto you full power and authority in case of invasion or rebellion to levy, gather and call together all persons meet and apt for the war, dwelling and inhabiting within the said several Counties as well within Liberties as without; And them to train, exercise, and put in a readiness, and to cause them to be armed and weaponed, and to take the muster of them in places most convenient, and to lead and conduct them for the purposes before expressed.

Case study 1: Cromwell in his own words – Source 4

Cromwell's reply to Parliament, when asked to be king, 1657

(W.C. Abbott (ed.), *The writings and speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, Vol. III, pp.442-44. Published by Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1947)

What is this source?

These extracts come from a speech that Cromwell made to Parliament in 1657.

He was responding to the 'Humble Petition and Advice', which asked Cromwell to become king.

What's the background to this source?

Cromwell was already Lord Protector. In 1657 Parliament asked him to accept the 'Humble Petition and Advice'. This was basically a new constitution or plan for government, which would make Cromwell king.

Cromwell became Lord Protector in December 1653. He hoped to try and achieve settlement in the country. This meant trying to make Britain an orderly place and put an end to all the wars and fighting over religion and political views. He tried to work with MPs to achieve this. However, he found this difficult and dismissed the first Protectorate Parliament in January 1655. To help him rule after this, he appointed eleven army commanders (Major Generals) from August 1655. That was unpopular and unsuccessful. So Parliament suggested this new plan.

It's worth knowing that ...

Cromwell eventually refused the crown. We do not know for sure why he did this.

Most MPs wanted him to accept. However, most of the army officers and soldiers did not want him to become king. Some historians think that Cromwell refused the crown because he thought God would frown on him. Accepting the crown would show pride and ambition and Cromwell thought this would offend God.



Your turn: What can we learn from this source?

1. Study the notes that support this source. What was Cromwell offered?
2. What does this suggest about Parliament's view of Cromwell?
3. Study the source. What was Cromwell's response?
4. Some critics accused Cromwell of greed and ambition. Does this source support that accusation?
5. What overall impression does this source give of Cromwell?

Source 4

MR. SPEAKER,

This frame of government, that it hath pleased the Parliament by your hand to offer to me, truly I should have a very brazen

forehead, if it should not beget in me a great deal of consternation of spirit, it being of so high and great importance, as by your opening of it, and by the reading of it, is manifest to all men to be. The welfare, the peace, the settlement of three nations, and all that rich treasure of the best people in the world being involved therein, I say, this consideration alone ought to beget in me the greatest reverence and fear of God, that ever possessed a man in this world.

I have therefore but this one word to say to you: That seeing you have made this progress in this business, and completed the work on your part, I may have some short time to ask counsel of God and of my own heart. And I hope that neither the honour of any weak or unwise people, nor yet the desires of any that may have lusting after things that are not good, shall steer me to give other than such an answer as may be ingenuous and thankful, thankfully acknowledging your care and integrity, and such an answer as shall be for the good of those, that I presume you and I serve, and are ready to serve.

Case study 1: Cromwell in his own words – Source 5

A speech by Cromwell to MPs, responding to the 'Humble Petition and Advice', 3 April 1657

(W.C. Abbott (ed.), *The writings and speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, Vol. III, pp.445-46. Published by Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1947)

What is this source?

These extracts come from a speech that Cromwell made to a Committee of MPs in April 1657.

He was responding to the 'Humble Petition and Advice', which set out a new constitution or plan for ruling the country. It also offered to make him king.

What's the background to this source?

In 1657 Cromwell and the MPs agreed a new constitution for ruling the country called the 'Humble Petition and Advice'. Cromwell accepted this constitution, but he refused their offer to become king.

Most MPs wanted Cromwell to become king and most of the army did not. Some historians think Cromwell refused the crown because he wanted to avoid causing more arguments and fights. Other historians think it was because he thought too much pride and ambition would offend God.

It's worth knowing that ...

In the years after the wars Cromwell and Parliament were anxious to achieve stability and peace in the country. However, Cromwell often clashed with MPs on the issues of liberty (freedom) and being tolerant (allowing people to have different ideas and ways of doing things).

MPs were terrified of returning to the chaos and damage of the Civil War years. They believed that any religious or political ideas that were even slightly unusual should be crushed to stop them causing more problems to society.

If Cromwell had sided with MPs on this issue, he could have gained a lot of popularity and support. However, he did not. He thought stability was

important, but he thought religious freedom and civil liberty were important as well. He would not simply crush all groups whose views were unusual.

Cromwell believed that people could find God in their own ways – not just by belonging to the Church of England and obeying its laws and rules. He defended the right of smaller Protestant groups to worship God in their own ways. He even tolerated Catholics as long as they did not cause trouble. During Cromwell's reign Jews were allowed back into England for the first time since the Middle Ages.

Your turn: What can we learn from this source?

1. What did Cromwell say were the main concerns in the world?
2. What does this source show us about Cromwell's relationship with Parliament?
3. Study the notes that support this source. Why did Cromwell's beliefs often cause him to disagree with MPs?
4. Why was Cromwell such a strong supporter of civil liberty (freedom)?
5. Some critics accused Cromwell of greed and ambition. Does this source support that accusation?
6. What overall impression does this source give of Cromwell?



Source 5

you have been zealous of the two greatest concerns that God hath in the world. The one is that of Religion, and of the preservation of the professors of it; to give them all due and just liberty, and to assert the truths of God, which you have done in part in this paper, and do refer it to be done more fully by yourselves and me hereafter. And as to the Liberty of men professing Godliness under a variety of forms amongst us, you have done that which never was done before,

The other thing cared for is, the Civil Liberty and Interest of the Nation. Which though it is,—and indeed I think ought to be, subordinate to a more peculiar interest of God,—yet it is the next best God hath given men in this world;

You have testified your value and affection as to my person, as high as you could; for more you could not do! I shall always keep a grateful memory of this in my heart, and by you I give the Parliament this my grateful acknowledgment.

Case study 1: Cromwell in his own words – Source 6

Cromwell's thoughts about his job, 13 April 1657

(W.C. Abbott (ed.), *The writings and speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, Vol. III, p. 470. Published by Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1947)

What is this source?

These are parts of a speech that Cromwell made to a committee of MPs in April 1657. It was one of many meetings he had with this committee.

He was responding to the 'Humble Petition and Advice'.

What's the background to this source?

In 1657 Cromwell and the MPs agreed a new constitution for ruling the country called the Humble Petition and Advice. Cromwell accepted this constitution, but he refused the offer to become king, which was also made to him.

In the years after the Civil Wars Cromwell and Parliament were anxious to achieve stability and peace in the country. However, Cromwell clashed with Parliament over many issues. They tried out several different ways of ruling the country in the years that Cromwell was in power.

It's worth knowing that ...

It is not clear why Cromwell refused the throne.

Many people wanted him to become king, but many others did not want this. It may be that Cromwell refused it because he thought it would cause trouble and even rebellion. Some historians also think that Cromwell feared God would frown on him becoming king, as it would be arrogant. This may be why Cromwell referred to himself as a constable. A constable was an important local official who kept order, but it was a role which a long way away from the power and status of king or Lord Protector. It was a more modest job.



Learning Curve *Civil War*



Civil War > What kind of ruler was Oliver Cromwell? > Cromwell in his own words

Your turn: What can we learn from this source?

1. According to Cromwell, why did he end up as Lord Protector?
2. What was his attitude to being called either 'King' or 'Lord Protector'?
3. Why do you think he refused the title of king?
4. Why did he compare himself to a constable?
5. Some critics accused Cromwell of greed and ambition. Does this source support that accusation?
6. What overall impression does this source give of Cromwell?

Source 6

I am a man standing in the place I am in, which place I undertook not so much out of the hope of doing any good, as out of a desire to prevent mischief and evil, which I did see was imminent upon the nation. I saw we were running headlong into confusion and disorder, and would necessarily run into blood, and I was passive to those that desired me to undertake the place that now I have.

And therefore I am not contending for one name compared with another, and therefore have nothing to answer to any arguments that were used in giving preference to Kingship or Protectorship. For I should almost think that any name were better than my name, and I should altogether think any person fitter than I am for any such business, and I compliment not, God knows it!

as far as I can, I am ready to serve not as a King, but as a constable. For truly I have as before God thought it often, that I could not tell what my business was, nor what I was in the place I stood, save [by] comparing it with a good constable to keep the peace of the parish. And truly this hath been my content and satisfaction in the troubles that I have undergone, that yet you have peace.