

Chapter Seven

The Army Debates of 1647

I

The officers and Agitators met in a General Council of War at Reading on the morning of July 16, 1647.¹ The temper of the Army had not been improved by a widespread rumour that Colonel Poyntz intended to betray the Northern Army into the hands of the Scots,² and therefore the Council met in the knowledge that it must resolve its differences without delay.

The meetings of this Council set the stage for all future army debates during the interregnum. They are important for many reasons – they show us how the Army regarded itself as representative of the whole nation, and they illustrate the Urgency behind the desire for a just peace;³ but for our better understanding of Cromwell their importance can hardly be over-emphasized, not only because we trace through them the growth of his political ideas, but also because they demonstrate in a most striking way the “church” relationship between him and his troops, and present us with a clear picture of ecclesiastical discipline existing side by side with military discipline in Fairfax’s incredible army.

The occasion on July 16⁴ was to discuss a *Representation*⁵ by the Agitators, urging the immediate march of the Army upon London. At the opening of the afternoon session Cromwell introduced the debate by emphasizing that their task was to prepare something which would present a reasonable chance of peaceful

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1. The Agitators were admitted to this Council in order to maintain unity. Cf. Newsletter [by John Rushworth?], *C.P.I.*, 214 f. The *Clarke Papers* give a full account of the Army Debates of 1647. A. S. P. Woodhouse in *Puritanism and Liberty* gives full accounts of the later debates at Putney and Whitehall, and gives a summary of the Reading debates in an appendix. R.H. Abbott and Mrs. Lomas report Cromwell’s speeches in full, linked by the argument of the rest of the debate. For the sake of consistency, we have used Abbott’s text for Cromwell’s own words.
 2. Poyntz was arrested by his own men, but released by order of Fairfax.
 3. Cf. the utterances of officers such as Capt. Clarke and Lt.-Col. Jubbes, who cannot be placed in any group with precision. *Ibid.*, 180; Woodhouse, 99.
 4. *C.P.*, I, 176–82; *W.S.*, I, 475–7; *L-C*, III, 333 f. (Supp. 24).
 5. *C.P.*, I, 170–5.

settlement for the nation,⁶ and he argued strongly for a treaty with Parliament to secure their rights, rather than any display of force.⁷ One of the Agitators, Allen, assured the General that he and the men he represented did not question the integrity of the officers, but because they were suspicious of the men with whom they had to treat, they thought immediate action was less dangerous than delay.⁸ In reply Cromwell suggested that the most hasty method was not always the most effective: their enemies in Parliament were not “upon the gaining hand” but the exercise of force would tend “to make them gain more”. To this Allen replied that they had long hoped for a Parliament of the kind he had described, “a Parliament soe reformed as might back this present power”;⁹ but their friends at Westminster constantly appeared to be losing ground, and they would continue so unless the Army marched to London.

What was to be regarded as the ultimate authority within the State? Allen, quite clearly, regarded the “power” of the Army as independent of, and even superior to, the authority of Parliament. Cromwell on the other hand still respected Parliament as the authority which they had fought to uphold, and was seeking a way to reconcile the Army’s power with the Parliament’s authority, before the rash use of the former not only destroyed the last constitutional link with the past, but also denied the principles of their first resistance. His plea for a treaty, however confused in its expression, maintained the honour of both sides: he wanted reform, whereas the Agitators intended revolution.

Henry Ireton appears to stand with Cromwell at this point, but there is a subtle difference between the two men. Ireton was far less distressed at the possible use of force against Parliament – indeed, he was of the opinion that the use of force would be inevitable – but he was concerned that the Army should have a constitutional excuse for its actions. He had no such ideals about Parliamentary unanimity as Cromwell had, for he frankly admitted, “what reason have I to expect that other men should trust mee more than I should trust to them?”¹⁰ but he insisted that the Army should have a “legal” excuse for its actions.

6. *W.S.*, I, 478; *L-C*, III, 335; *C.P.*, I, 184; Woodhouse, 412.

7. *W.S.*, I, 478 f.; *L-C*, III, 336; *C.P.*, I, 185 f., Woodhouse, 413.

8. *C.P.*, I, 189–93. Similar arguments had been expressed previously by Captain Clarke.

9. *C.P.*, I, 193; Woodhouse, 415.

10. *C.P.*, I, 194 f.; Woodhouse, 415.

The Agitators believed – and it is clear that Ireton shared their belief – that whatever concessions the soldiers had gained from Parliament had, in Edward Sexby’s phrase, been wrung from it “rather out of feare then love”,¹¹ and that since the power had been put by Providence unto the hands of the soldiery it was their duty to use it.¹² Ultimately Cromwell would have agreed but he still hoped Parliament would become purged, not by external threats, but by its own action.¹³ On the following day, July 17, Ireton presented his *Heads of Proposals*,¹⁴ and on the 18th Fairfax appointed a committee of twelve officers to perfect the proposals.¹⁵ With this action the Army made its first attempt at legislating for the country.

II

Meanwhile the King had been provided with a preview of these proposals before they were officially presented to him.¹⁶ Sir John Berkeley seems to have regarded them as very moderate, and told the King that he would have suspected them more than he did if they had demanded less. He further advised Charles that “never was crown so near lost, so cheaply recover’d, as his Majesty’s would be, if they agreed upon such terms”.¹⁷ The King, however, was obsessed with the idea that his consent was indispensable to the constitutional settlement of the country.¹⁸ Reports from London indicated that the Army was unpopular in

11. *C.P.*, I, 207 f.

12. Although some of the Agitators were more secular in their approach to political theory than Cromwell, they all accepted the view of Providence that associated military success with the signs of God’s favour. Cf. Woodhouse’s introduction to *Puritanism and Liberty*, 54 ff.

13. *W.S.*, I, 481 f.; *L-C*, III, 339 f.; *C.P.*, I, 192 f.; Woodhouse, 414 f.

14. Text of the *Heads of Proposals*, Rushworth, VII, 731; Gardiner, *Const. Docs.*, 316–26; Woodhouse, 422–6 (Extracts). Ireton was aided in drafting the proposals by Cromwell and Lambert. Cf. Whitelocke, 254. See also the report of the proceedings in the Army Council on July 17, *C.P.*, I, 211–14, in which Ireton explains how he had been deputed to draw up the propositions. His defensive statement and the rather ambiguous comments by William Allen show how Ireton was regarded with suspicion by the Agitators.

15. Fairfax’s order appointing the council. *C.P.*, I, 216 f. Cf. Woodhouse, 421 f.

16. Berkeley, *Memoirs*, 30 ff.

17. *Ibid.*

18. After receiving Berkeley’s advice “his Majesty broke from me with the expression, Well! I shall see them glad ‘ere long to accept more equal terms”. *Ibid.*, 32.

the City, and Charles thought that the Army leaders would be forced to accept his terms. It is true that earlier accounts of the preparations being made against the Army had been grave, but after July 16 the Presbyterian majority in the House of Commons had dropped, and Fairfax was confirmed in his command of all the land forces in the country.¹⁹ The following day, in view of the Army's approach, the Commons gave the eleven members permission to withdraw.²⁰ Cromwell, Waller, Hammond and Rich assured the Parliamentary Commissioners in the name of the General and the Army that they were satisfied with the action and would be prepared to consider a settlement. The situation at that point promised well, and is reminiscent of the position immediately after the Saffron Walden Conference – Parliament apparently doing its best to conciliate the soldiers, and Cromwell using his influence to prevent violence. But just as the May crisis had been turned by a reaction in Parliament itself, so now the situation was altered by a reaction within the City. On July 21 an engagement was signed at Skinners' Hall by apprentices, watermen and "reformadoes" to maintain the Covenant, and to bring the King back to Westminster on his terms of May 12,²¹ and on the 26th a petition demanding the repeal of Parliamentary control of the city militia was presented to the Houses by a turbulent crowd. Both Houses were intimidated into a hasty assent, and a mob of rioters entered the Commons and held the Speaker in his chair while a resolution was passed recalling the King to London.²²

None of the constitutional forms of public authority could effect its will, and it was no longer a question whether or not force would be used to bring Parliament to a decision, but which form of power would become dominant, the New Model Army or the London mob. On July 30 when the House reassembled fifty-seven members had fled to the Army for protection,²³ and neither House had a Speaker. The members left at Westminster were quite unabashed. They proceeded to hurry Presbyterian

19. *L.J.*, IX, 338; Whitelocke, 259.

20. *C.J.*, V, 251 f. This occurred exactly two months after Cromwell had read the report from Saffron Walden in the Commons.

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22. For an account of the riots, cf. *C.P.*, I, 217 f.

23. Cf. Walker, *Hist. of Independency*, Pt. I, 40 f.; Ludlow, *Memoirs*, I, 161 f.; and Sir Charles Firth's note, *C.P.*, I, 218–19. The fact that the Earl of Manchester sought refuge with the Army suggests that the threat was real enough.

legislation through the Houses, and they forbade Fairfax to come within thirty miles of the city, in spite of the fact that the Army was already at Colnbrook, between Windsor and Twickenham. It was probably just before the news of the London riots reached Charles that Major Huntington delivered a message to Ireton from the King²⁴ to say that he had decided to put his entire dependence upon them, and that if they “proved honest men” they would prevent further bloodshed. Ireton received this assurance with very great jubilation, and vowed that they would be “the veriest knaves that ever lived” if they failed to keep their promises “because the King by not declaring against us had given us great advantage against our Adversaries”.

However, when the news came to Charles of the city riots and the votes of Parliament calling for his return, it put an entirely different complexion on matters. He not only went back on his word, but he was guilty of a gross error of political judgment, for instead of seeing that these events were likely to bring the Army to London, he imagined that the officers would be thrown back on him. The Earl of Lauderdale had assured him of the support of the Scots and English Presbyterians, and he now felt he could raise his terms. Hence when the *Proposals* were presented to him officially he rejected them with scorn which was the amazement of even his own supporters. He even went out of his way to inform the officers that he regretted nothing so much as his action in the Bill against Strafford, and that he intended to have the Church “establish’d according to Law”. He hoped God had forgiven him the sin of allowing episcopacy to be given up in Scotland, and he reiterated several times, “You cannot be without me; You will fall to ruin if I do not sustain you.” Sir John Berkeley and John Ashburnham, the King’s agents, were just as much at a loss to understand this conduct as were the officers, and although Charles eventually moderated his tone, it was too late, for Rainsborough had already slipped out of the conference and sent off a report to the regiments.²⁵

After this exhibition of royal intransigence Cromwell grew somewhat cooler in his attitude towards the King,²⁶ and he expostulated to Ashburnham that he could not be trusted. He charged the King with having intrigued “to raise new troubles”,

24. *Sundry Reasons*, 7 f.

25. Berkeley, *Memoirs*, 34 f.

26. Clarendon, *History*, X, 125.

and he [Cromwell] “would not be answerable if any thing fell out amiss and contrary to expectation.”²⁷ The fears were not ungrounded. The Army had approached Charles because, in view of their own experience of Parliament, the soldiers felt that failure to reach a settlement may not have been entirely due to the King, but they would not have to suffer many indignities from Charles before returning to the attitude Baxter had noticed after Naseby.²⁸ However, even after the conference reported above, the Army officers still tried to reconcile the King to their proposals and when Berkeley asked them how they proposed to obtain the concurrence of Parliament, it was Rainsborough who bluntly intimated that Parliament would not be given much choice in the matter.²⁹ But while Charles felt he had the power to raise his terms he would continue to prevaricate. He could not see that although he was undoubtedly indispensable to the legal settlement of the country, the Army had already shown that it was ready to dispense with legality. The stubbornness which resulted from his failure to recognize his position *de facto* as distinct from his position *de jure* was the one real hindrance at this time to final settlement.³⁰

From Colnbrook the Army advanced to Hounslow Heath³¹ where, on August 4, 1647, it received an anxious plea from the Common Council of London that there should be no further bloodshed: official London, at any rate, was beginning to feel some remorse at its share in recent events. In reply, the Army denounced as illegal the choice of new Speakers “by some gentlemen of Westminster”, and the votes passed in the absence of the Speakers.³² On the following day the nine peers and fifty-seven Members of Parliament who had taken refuge with Fairfax subscribed to an engagement to live and die with him and the Army,³³ and on August 6 the Army marched into the city.³⁴ There

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, I, 57.

29. Berkeley, *Memoirs*, 36 f.

30. Cromwell and Ireton had been able to control the rank and file so far because the first suggestion of negotiating with Charles had come from them. As the rank and file lost confidence in Charles it became suspicious of Cromwell and Ireton for persisting in negotiations. Cf. Berkeley's *Memoirs*, 24–6, 39–46, *passim*; Clarendon, *History*, X, 126.

31. August 3, 1647.

32. *L.J.*, IX, 375–8.

33. *Ibid.*, 385; Rushworth, VII, 755.

34. Whitelocke, 264.

was nothing for the remaining members at Westminster to do but to submit with as good a grace as possible.³⁵ Fairfax was made Governor of the Tower, and Colonel Tichborne was installed as Lieutenant; a day of public Thanksgiving was ordered, and a gratuity of a month's pay was ordered for the rank and file of the Army, while the city hastened to make its separate peace by inviting Fairfax and his officers to a banquet, which the General declined.³⁶

The Members of Parliament, however, realized no more than did the King the real danger that confronted them in the radical movement within the Army.³⁷ They saw the Levellers chiefly as an embarrassment to Cromwell and Ireton, and not as a well-organized body of responsible opinion with a political theory of its own based upon the common rights of man. Cromwell, however much he might dislike the use of force against Parliament, had as his first aim the maintenance of Army unity and discipline, and he would not hold out indefinitely against the Levellers' pressure. His remarks at Reading did not deny the principle of purging Parliament, but had urged that Parliament should be given time to purge itself. There was a limit to his patience, and on one occasion, exasperated by some piece of Presbyterian truculence, he remarked to Ludlow in the House, "These men will never leave till the army pull them out by the ears."³⁸ On August 18, at Kingston, the Army Council drew up a declaration in support of the demand for a parliamentary purge, and on August 20 a new attempt was to be made to outlaw the proceedings conducted in the Speakers' absence. The officers who were

35. The Commons resolved that, "This House doth approve the Coming up of the General and the Army, for the secure and safe Sitting of the Parliament: And that Thanks be given to the General and Army for the same." *C.J.*, V, 268. The Lords went even further, and resolved that "This House doth approve the Declaration of Sir Thomas Fairfax, and his Proceedings in bringing up the Army". *L.J.*, IX, 379.

36. Whitelocke, 264.

37. The Lords desired the concurrence of the lower House in an Ordinance declaring null and void all those acts performed by the Houses during the period July 26-August 6. This motion was lost by two votes. The resolutions of the House during that period were repealed, but the implication of a vote declaring them null and void, as Abbott has pointed out, would have been to render those members responsible for these measures liable to censure or punishment for unconstitutional proceedings. The extreme Presbyterians by this vote virtually secured confirmation of the legality of their sitting without the Speakers. Whitelocke, 264; *C.J.*, V, 270; *W.S.*, I, 495.

38. *Memoirs*, I, 148. For the date of this incident cf. *ibid.*, note; *G.C.W.*, III, 350 n.; *W.S.*, I, 496 n.; Huntington, *Sundry Reasons*, 8.

Members of Parliament, having left a party of soldiers at the door and stationed a regiment in Hyde Park, succeeded in getting the measure passed. It was Ireton's method.

III

The fact that Henry Ireton seems to have had a growing influence upon his father-in-law helps to explain some of the charges of inconsistency against the latter. The influence was real enough to be noticed by some of their near associates among the General Officers, and Clarendon tells us that Sir John Berkeley was the more ready to believe his informants in the Army Council – Watson and Staines³⁹ – “because they seemed very much to blame Ireton's stubbornness towards the king, and to fear that he often prevailed upon Cromwell against his own inclinations”.

Charles's agents were quick to work upon any suspicion which existed between the Agitators and their higher officers. Berkeley himself had a very extensive correspondence with Levellers in the Army, and other royalist sympathizers were active in spreading rumours of a personal engagement between Cromwell and the King, which increased the suspicions of the rank and file. A good deal of this suspicion rested on the very flimsy circumstantial evidence that “Cromwell's and Ireton's door was open to us [the royalists] when it was shut to them”.⁴⁰

The position of Cromwell and Ireton was not enviable. The fleet was infected with royalism,⁴¹ and the influence of the Leveller movement was growing in the Army. They were distrusted by the King,⁴² Parliament and Levellers, and although they maintained

39. Dr. William Staines [or Stane], Quarter-Master General, and Leonard Watson, Scoutmaster-General. *History*, X, 135.

40. Berkeley, *Memoirs*, 41. Cf. *Ibid.*, 39–40. While John Lilburne was in prison, Sir Lewis Dives, a royalist fellow-prisoner, steadily fed him with rumours that Cromwell and Ireton had a secret accommodation with Charles, since “he judged it for the King's service to divide Cromwell and the Army”. Berkeley also records that Lady Carlisle assiduously spread a rumour that Cromwell had a personal agreement with the King and was to be created Earl of Essex.

41. Vice-Admiral Batten resigned his commission, and Rainsborough was appointed in his place. Whitelocke, 271. The sailors, however, refused to serve under the latter, and in the following spring Batten sailed with eleven ships to join Rupert in Holland.

42. On August 26, 1647, they had voted for a modified form of the Newcastle Propositions being sent to Charles, and he could not understand how they could do this when their own proposals were before him. (Bates, *Elenchus* (1685 edn.), Pt. I, 88; Dugdale, *Short View*, 264 f.) It was, however, one way

their control over the Army Council, it was extremely tenuous.⁴³ When Major Francis White bluntly declared in the Army Council that there was “no superintendent Authority in this kingdom but what is exercised by the power and force of the sword”, he was stating no more than many would take to be a sober estimate of the truth.⁴⁴ Everything depended on the speed with which a settlement could be concluded, and Cromwell and Ireton sought desperately to find a way out of the impasse. They showed themselves ready to negotiate with all elements in the situation. Cromwell visited Lilburne in prison, to secure from him the promise that he would not stir up the Army to mutiny if he were released,⁴⁵ and he even went so far to conciliate the Presbyterians as to announce openly his disinclination “to cast down the foundation of Presbytery and set up Independency”.⁴⁶ He was in the midst of men who feared and distrusted him, and he knew it. On September 14, writing to Michael Jones in Ireland to congratulate him on his victory at Dungan Hill he said that,⁴⁷ “though it may be for the present a cloud may lie over our actions, to them who are not acquainted with the grounds of our t[ransactions?]; yet we doubt not but God will clear our integrity and innocence from any other ends we aim at but his glory and the public good”.

It rings true: the evidence is that Cromwell was honestly striving to reach the basis for a settlement, but within the Council he had to face the bitter antagonism of Rainsborough who led a group which was opposed to any further negotiation with Charles,⁴⁸ and it is clear that Henry Marten headed a similar group in the Commons. On September 17, 1647, Marten

of showing Charles what he could expect from Parliament. When he saw the new parliamentary terms he promptly showed his preference for the Army's proposals, and commended them as the basis for all future discussion. Whitelocke, 269.

43. It is possible that the waning prestige of the Army leaders may have had something to do with the refusal of the city to raise a loan of £50,000 for the Army's support. Whitelocke, 268, 269.
44. *A Copy of a Letter ... by Francis White* (1647). White was expelled from the Council for uttering these words.
45. But on September 14 Cromwell supported a motion to search for precedents regarding the jurisdiction of the Lords in Lilburne's case. Lilburne, *An Additional Plea* (1647); *C.J.*, V, 301.
46. *Two Declarations from Sir Thomas Fairfax and the Generali Council* (September 7, 1647).
47. *W.S.*, I, 505 f.; *L-C*, I, 277 f. (XLVI).
48. Ford to Hopton, September 20, *Clarendon MSS.* 2597. A quarrel was occasioned by Cromwell's insistence that negotiations with Charles should continue.

proposed that no further addresses be made to the King,⁴⁹ and the temper of the House can be judged from the fact that on the 23rd it voted that certain of the Newcastle Propositions, including the parts abolishing episcopacy, should be submitted once more to the King, and that only one more application should be made. During these debates Cromwell, Ireton, Vane, St. John and Fiennes had urged the method of a personal treaty between Parliament and the King, and a royalist newsletter of the period commented that their “Civilities are visible”.⁵⁰

The same could not be said of Charles. The royal obstinacy increased with the arrival of the Scottish Earls of Lanark and Loudoun to join their colleague Lauderdale,⁵¹ and this renewed Scottish diplomacy reopened the possibility of invasion from the north.⁵² There was a rumour that Cromwell believed that further negotiation with Charles was useless, and that Ireton had disagreed and offered to relinquish his commission;⁵³ but although their negotiations with the King had broken down by October 20, Cromwell made a speech three hours long on that day and “spoke very favourably of the King, concluding that it was necessary to re-establish him as soon as possible”.⁵⁴ The evidence therefore shows that, although in their negotiations with the King Cromwell and Ireton had failed, they still hoped for a settlement with him, if not through the Army, then through Parliament. The hardening of Parliament’s attitude towards Charles seemed to provide the Army officers with a new opportunity to press their terms, and it would have seemed to be wiser from their point of view not to urge too far the idea of a personal treaty between Charles and the Houses. Why then did Cromwell speak in the King’s favour on October 20? Was it to impress Charles by his sincerity, or was it because he sincerely feared the result of a complete break with the King?

49. Ford to Hopton, September 28, *Clarendon MSS.* 2604. Cf. Whitelocke, 271.

50. *Clarendon MSS.* 2602. Cf. *C.P.*, I, 230 n.

51. October II, Letter of Intelligence, *Clarendon MS.* 2622. For Cromwell’s very full activities during these days see his letter to Fairfax, October 13. *W.S.*, I, 510; *L-C*, I, 278 f. (XLVII); and *W.S.*, I, 508 f.

52. Cf. Cromwell’s letter to Fairfax recommending the appointment of Col. Robert Overton to command at Hull, October 22. *W.S.*, I, 513 f.; *L-C*, I, 280 f. (XLVIII).

53. Letter of Intelligence, *Clarendon MSS.* 2622.

54. Newsletter, *Record Office (Roman) Transcripts*, October 22/November 1, quoted Gardiner, *G.C.W.*, III, 381; *W.S.* I, 512 (translation).