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Web 4.3 Professor Barry Coward's assessment of the students' websites

To Esher College AS History students.

Congratulations.

I enjoyed very much looking at and using your three websites on the intriguing question of why the parliamentarians won the English Civil War. Not only was I impressed by the work that you have done, but I also liked your enthusiasm for studying the English Civil War that is clearly reflected in your websites. Long may your enjoyment of and interest in this fascinating period continue!

Layout and presentation

All three websites are well laid out and look attractive and welcoming. It would have been an improvement if captions had been given to some of the images you use in order to link them to the material in the text. But all three sites make good use of visual material (I particularly liked the woodcut of Prince Rupert and his dog 'Boy'). Your use of film is also a very positive aspect of all three sites. Listening to the commentaries attached to the films of your visits to the Tower of London, I thought that they do not refer specifically enough to the question of why the parliamentarians won the war. But the film material certainly adds to the attractiveness and liveliness of the websites.

Effectiveness of the analyses of the reasons why the parliamentarians won the war.

None of the three sites cover all the possible reasons that have been put forward for explaining the war's outcome – a point I'll deal with later – but all three make a commendable effort to deal with reasons separately and in an analytical way, dealing with the parliamentarians' military and naval superiority and with the parliamentarians' superior resources. You avoid the trap of simply telling the story of what happened. This is a very positive feature of all three sites.

(a) The parliamentarians' military and naval superiority.

Although the three sites differ about what is the most important reason for the eventual military victory achieved by the parliamentarians (Groups 1 and

2 claiming that it is the parliamentarians' possession of superior resources, while Group 3 consider that the reorganisation of the main parliamentary army in the winter of 1644-45 is more important), all three are structured in very similar ways. Despite their different conclusions each begins with a consideration of the New Model Army and the Self-Denying Ordinance (Groups 2 and 3 differ only from Group 1 in making these into two separate categories), and each takes roughly similar lines about this military reorganisation. They all emphasise that the military effectiveness of the New Model Army was due to the way it differed from royalist armies and indeed from previous parliamentary armies in that the soldiers in the New Model Army were better paid, disciplined and organised and benefited from a system of promotion because of military merit rather than social status. On its New Model Army 'page' Group 1's site has a link to another website, Wentworth's regimes of the Sealed Knot, which I found by accident when I clicked on one of the images. This link should have been 'signposted' and, more importantly some explanation should have been given of how this site could be used to find material to support arguments made in Group 1's text. On the other hand, Group 1's site has a tantalising reference to the 'greater commitment' of the soldiers in the New Model Army. Why this might have been the case is not explained, except by the implicit assumption that soldiers who are better paid fight with more commitment. But might there not be another feature of the New Model Army that explains the 'greater commitment' of its soldiers to fighting? (see my section below on 'what all three sites failed to deal with satisfactorily') None of the sites consider this question as fully as they might have done, although Group 1's site at least hints at it.

All three sites also explain the defects of Prince Rupert's cavalry tactics, contrasting these critically with those employed by Cromwell. This is undoubtedly an important and relevant point. I wonder, however, if it would not have been emphasised more strongly if it had been made on a 'page' immediately after the 'pages' on the New Model Army?

All three sites also deal well with the importance of the parliamentarians' control of the seas. Groups 2 and 3 give it a separate page, but Group 3's does not ignore it, linking it with the parliamentarians' possession of superior resources.

(b) The parliamentarians' superior resources.

Under this heading all three groups make excellent use of the visits made to the Tower of London, and it is hard to separate the effectiveness of each group's explanation of why the parliamentarians' possession of the Tower was a crucial reason for its victory in the war. The reasons why this was so are effectively summarised in Group 1's site, but all three deal well with them. I was also pleased to see that all three in their different ways make the point that the possession of the Tower was not just important because it was the location of the Mint and of armaments, but also (and probably more importantly) because it gave the parliamentarians control of the whole of London. This massive metropolis (the largest in western Europe in

1640) with its teeming population and its wealthy trading companies is where the parliamentarians had the advantage over the royalists in being able to recruit soldiers and raise enormous sums of money in taxation and from loans (not from banks, as Group 3 say on their website – there were no banks at this time – but from private citizens and trading companies).

In contrast to their generally good treatment of the resources available to the parliamentarians, all three websites are much weaker when they turn to the state of the king's finances. There is not much doubt, as all three sites say, that the king had much smaller financial resources than the parliamentarians. But reading these three sites one would not know that the royalists had begun after the start of the war to raise money in new ways, copying those adopted by the parliamentarians (see my section below on 'what all three websites fail to deal with satisfactorily'), casting doubt on the extent of the differences claimed by all three websites between the wealth of the parliamentarians and the poverty of the royalists.

Which of the three websites has the edge over the others in terms of presenting an effectiveness analysis?

This is a really hard question to answer, because each site has individual strengths in relation to the others. Even though its 'introduction' might have been developed further, at least Group 2's site has one; and even though it is limited only to internet resources, at least Group 1's site has a bibliography to help its users to research this question for themselves. But, if pushed, I think that Group 1's site has the edge over the others for two main reasons. Firstly, it is the only one to raise the question of how important was the contribution of the Scottish Covenanters' army to the eventual success of the English parliamentarians (my own view is that this has been exaggerated in the past, but it is one that needs to be considered), and secondly it makes some neat links from one 'page' to another (one example of the latter is the neat way that at the end of the 'page' on the Tower of London, there is quote from the Tower guidebook that points to a major point made on the next 'page' on the parliamentarians' resources). It is a close-run thing but perhaps Group 1's site is more coherently put together than the others.

What all three sites fail to do satisfactorily.

All three sites would have been improved considerably by the inclusion of an introduction. This needs to be more than Group 2's introduction which provides some relevant background information about the progress of the war towards the parliamentarians' eventual victory. Websites, like history essays, need good introductions that explain the 'problem' or the question being tackled. This can be done in many different ways, but one way to do this in this case would be to explain to the reader or user of the website that, in order to discover why the English Civil War ended as it did, other questions need to be addressed, like whether the outcome of the war was

determined more by 'military' factors or by factors that are to be found off battlefields in the resources held by both sides. Another question that could be raised is whether the parliamentarians won the war or was the war *lost* by the king and the royalists, raising for consideration the suggestion that what Charles I did or did not do contributed to his own defeat. As I say, there are many ways to write an introduction, but taking my suggestions here would lead logically to a three-part structure for the website:

1. The military superiority of the parliamentarians
2. The greater resources of men and money possessed by the parliamentarians
3. The failings of the king and his advisers – the defects of the royalist war effort

All three sites have lots to say about these, especially 1 and 2. Could I mention one important point under each heading that I think you do not deal with fully.

1. Regarding the military superiority of the New Model Army, there is an additional characteristic of that army that none of you emphasise. This is the religious zeal of some of its officers and rank and file soldiers. Now, this is a matter about which historians have differed in the past (historians differ about most things!). But it is at least possible that, when the New Model Army was created by amalgamating the parliamentarians' three major existing armies, a number of godly officers (i.e. men with radical Protestant religious views, largely from the old army of the Eastern Association) retained their commands in the new army, along with men who had volunteered for military service i.e. who were not conscripts. That this was so is seen by the outcry from conservative Presbyterian parliamentarians when the officers of the New Model Army were chosen early in 1645. If this is the case, then godly zeal for the intertwined causes of parliamentary and religious liberties that had driven some to fight against the king since 1642 needs to be considered (along with the other features of the new army that you all emphasise) as a possible ingredient of the New Model Army's remarkable success on the battlefield.
2. Regarding the parliamentarians' superior resources, there is something else that needs to be added to your analyses of this issue. This is the raft of legislation passed by parliament in 1643. Then acts were passed that for the first time ensured that people in England and Wales paid taxes that related closely to their true wealth. Previously people with wealth had been underassessed for taxation purpose. Now, new taxes, principally the so called 'assessment' (a direct tax on income), 'sequestrations' (financial penalties paid by royalists) and the excise tax (a purchase tax on all kinds of common items of consumption) changed all this. Ironically these new taxes were much more effective in raising money than the much-hated financial expedients used by Charles I in the 1620s and 1630s, like forced loans and ship money. They were all administered and collected by a new method of local government by which 'county committees were appointed consisting of men sympathetic to the parliamentary cause. The king copied these methods in the areas controlled

by the royalists. But, backed as they were by parliamentary authority, the parliamentarians' financial measures were much more effective, greatly adding to the financial resources the parliamentarians gained from their possession of London.

3. All three of your sites refer in passing to the king's 'faulty command structure' without explaining what is meant by this. If you think about it, from the point of view of the command structures of both sides Charles ought to have been at a great advantage. The command structure of his opponents was riven by divisions (between English parliamentarians over whether the war should be pursued vigorously before peace negotiations began, and divisions between English parliamentarians and Scottish Covenanters, which became very great especially after Marston Moor when the major differences about religion between them became apparent¹). In contrast the king was in sole command. Unfortunately, however, Charles threw away this theoretical advantage by allowing disagreements amongst his advisers not only to be aired but also to dominate his strategy. He failed to follow military strategies consistently and to be swayed largely by the person to whom he had been talking last.

In my view even more serious damage to the royalist war effort was caused by Charles's decision to make an alliance with the Irish Catholics in September 1643 (at exactly the time when his opponents were allying with the Scottish Covenanters). This was a treaty (the so-called 'Cessation Treaty') by which Charles sought to get the use of Irish Catholic soldiers to aid his war effort in England. The impact of this in England was disastrous for his cause, since the news of the treaty enabled his opponents to portray Charles (as they had been trying to do for many years) as a man at the centre of a Catholic – a Popish – Plot to destroy English Protestantism and the English parliament. The Cessation Treaty brought Charles very little military support; instead it gave his opponents a massive propaganda point to use against him and to help stiffen the resolution of their supporters to defeat the king in the war.

Postscript.

Reading through all this, I realise that it may seem as if I am being very critical of what you have done. I don't want to give you that impression.

¹ Basically the issue between them was about who should control the Church, Scottish Presbyterians were adamant that control should lie with churchmen, whereas the English insisted that control should be held by the secular State, as had long been the case in England. So great did these differences become in 1644 that major quarrels broke out between English parliamentarians and between the English and Scots that were so serious that after Marston Moor the military contribution of the Scottish Covenanters' army to the parliamentary war effort was useless. That's why, as I wrote earlier, I am not as keen as Group 1 on giving a lot of weight to the role of the Scottish alliance in securing the king's defeat. The disagreements caused by the alliance nearly led to the king's victory!

As I wrote at the beginning I like very much what you have done. Indeed I am full of admiration for what you have done, especially given the fact that you have only been studying the period for a short time. I am able to make comments because I have been doing so many years! Do keep on studying the period. I hope that you enjoy it as much as I do.

Barry Coward
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