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# *Historiographical overview*

Excitement and anticipation spread throughout Europe on the eve of the first international conflict to be fought by Britain's newly restored king. "All the world and the Pope himself is big with expectation of what issue his Majesty's grand engagement with Holland will have," gushed Charles II's envoy in Italy Joseph Kent.[1] The English themselves were brimming with confidence and enthusiasm. The Earl of Arlington informed the English ambassador in Spain, Sir Richard Fanshawe, that "the whole people of what opinion or interest soever are greatly fond of this war."[2] A Venetian observer noted "the great inclination of the people here to the rupture and war against the Dutch."[3] Even the exceedingly cautious William Coventry marveled at the unanimity of the fleet. "I have not heard one rodomontade from any of them," Coventry wrote to Arlington, instead all of the seaman displayed "an assurance of beating [the Dutch]."[4]

English confidence was matched by the government's naval preparations. The Irish Viscount Conway wrote to his countryman Sir George Rawdon that Charles II had prepared "the powerfullest fleet that ever went out of England."[5] "I believe the English fleet the most considerable that any one monarch has ever put to sea," Samuel Tuke informed his friend Sir John Evelyn.[6] The English Admiral James Duke of York proudly recorded in his memoirs that the nation "never hitherto had seen [a fleet] so glorious and formidable."[7] Nor was the fleet poorly provisioned. Sir Thomas Clarges presumed it to be "better mann'd and [to] consist of better ships than any

1 Joseph Kent to Joseph Williamson, 17/27 June 1665, SP 85/8, f. 3r.
2 Arlington to Fanshawe, 6 April 1665, BL, Harleian MSS 7010, f. 231v.
3 News from London, 6/16 April 1665, *CSPV*, p. 106.
4 William Coventry to Arlington, 18 April 1665, SP 29/118/75. Arlington passed on this assessment to Fanshawe. See Arlington to Fanshawe, 30 March 1665, Thomas Bebington (editor), *The Right Honourable the Earl of Arlington's Letters* ... (London, 1701), Vol. II, p. 74.
5 Edward Conway to Rawdon, 28 March 1665, HL, HA14419.
6 Samuel Tuke to John Evelyn, 12 August 1665, Christ Church, Evelyn In-Letters 1298; see also John Evelyn, *Diary*, 8 May 1666, p. 436.
7 James S. Clarke (editor), *The Life of James the Second*, Vol. I (London, 1816), p. 405.

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has yet been seen in England."[8] The Duke of Buckingham's chaplain Thomas Sprat proclaimed "our sea-provisions [to be] far stronger than ever they were in any age or country before ... Never was there a greater abundance of materials in readiness! Never more skillful builders! Never more formidable preparations! Never more expert seamen! Never more valiant commanders!"[9]

A little more than two years after the opening battle of the second Anglo-Dutch War, however, the enthusiastic accolations had turned into bitter recriminations, the expectant cheers had been transformed into tears of shame. In early June 1667 the Dutch battle fleet sailed unopposed up the Medway, easily breaking through the chain across the river which alone protected the English great ships at Chatham. Led by Cornelius De Witt, with the English republican Colonel Dolman at his side, the Dutch burned and captured what remained of the glorious English navy. "Since the affront we have received here at Chatham," Sir William Coventry admitted to the Duke of Ormonde, the enemy "hath ... left such marks of our weakness and his power and made such impressions on the minds of men as that I am not sure I shall ever see the consequences of it overcome."[10] Arlington lamented that "we have received a great affront which we shall not quickly be able to wash off."[11] "By God!" screamed Sir William Batten at the Navy Board, "I think the devil shits Dutchmen."[12]

The effects of the Dutch exploit were soon apparent throughout England. "People are ready to tear their hairs off their heads," John Rushworth exclaimed to Lady Ranelagh.[13] Samuel Pepys recorded that "hardly anybody at court but doth look as if they cried."[14] "The ill news comes so thick," wrote Sir John Bramston from Chelmsford, "that we are not able to keep up the spirits of the people. Indeed we ourselves are so dejected that we cannot communicate it."[15] John Evelyn recalled that "this alarm was so great, as put both county and city into a panic fear and consternation, such as I hope I shall never see more; for everybody were flying, none knew why or whither."[16]

The Dutch had dealt a crushing blow. While many thought that "a peace

[8] Sir Thomas Clarges to George Rawdon, 5 May 1666, HL, HA 14202; see also William Coventry to Arlington, 18 April 1665, SP 29/118/75.

[9] Thomas Sprat, *Observations on Monsieur de Sorbier's Voyage into England* (London, 1665), pp. 169–171.

[10] Sir William Coventry to Ormonde, 22 June 1667, Carte 47, f. 488r.

[11] Arlington to Ormonde, 15 June 1667, Carte 46, f. 490r.

[12] Pepys *Diary*, Vol. VIII, 19 July 1667, p. 345.

[13] John Rushworth to Lady Ranelagh, 15 June 1667, SP 29/205/76. On the same day Lady Ranelagh wrote in slightly more muted tones to her brother. See Lady Ranelagh to Earl of Burlington, 15 June 1667, BL, Althorp Papers B4 (unfoliated).

[14] Samuel Pepys, *Diary*, Vol. VIII, 12 June 1667, p. 261.

[15] Sir John Bramston (Chelmsford) to Will Harris, 13 June 1667, SP 29/205/2.

[16] Evelyn, *Diary*, 11 June 1667, p. 484.

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may be bought too dear," there could be no serious objections to the Earl of Clarendon's conclusion that "a peace in this conjuncture would be very seasonable, and it is not in our part to refuse it."[17] Joseph Williamson's assistant James Hickes knew that the English "must now bow and buckle to their enemies."[18]

Historians have offered remarkably similar explanations for the causes and consequences of the English defeat in the second Anglo-Dutch War. While scholars have disagreed whether the war was fought as a consequence of commercial conflict or as the result of faction-fighting at the English court, none have thought that either side posed an ideological threat to the other. If the English lost the war, the proponents of this view naturally claimed, it was the result of structural failure rather than loss of ideological commitment. There was simply nothing at stake politically. The Dutch, Charles Wilson has insisted, "offered no threat to either England or France." From an English perspective, then, the wars had an "essentially offensive character."[19] Nor could there have been any thought of advancing an ideological program within Dutch political culture. There was no political opposition in the United Provinces. Sir Keith Feiling, who was more aware of Dutch party politics than most, has argued that while the English might have dallied with the Dutch Orangist opposition they knew very well of "the patent weakness of the Orange cause."[20]

English perceptions of the international situation, public concern with the conduct of the war, had little to do with the ignominious defeat at Chatham. In the accounts of most historians this was because the conduct of foreign policy remained very much a royal prerogative. "Our foreign policy," Feiling reminds his readers, "was still in a real sense personal to the King."[21] J. R. Jones has seen little reason to revise Feiling's classic assessment. "Public opinion," he contends, "whether spontaneous or in the shape of pressure groups seems to have had very little effect on those who made the major decisions. It was not just a constitutional fiction that foreign affairs were reserved, as exclusively a matter for the government, or (under the monarchy) for the royal prerogative."[22] Jonathan Israel, however, has

17 Clarendon to Hollis and Henry Coventry, 14 June 1667, Bod., Clar. 159, f. 33r.
18 James Hickes to Williamson, 14 June 1667, SP 29/205/64.
19 Charles H. Wilson, *Profit and Power* (London, 1957), pp. 145–146.
20 Keith Feiling, *British Foreign Policy 1660–1672* (London, 1930), p. 198.
21 Feiling, *British Foreign Policy*, p. 20. Feiling denies that public opinion had anything to do with the diplomatic revolution of 1667–1668. See p. 232.
22 J. R. Jones, *Britain and the World 1649–1815* (Glasgow, 1980), p. 53. It is perhaps appropriate at this point to note that I am uncertain as to Ronald Hutton's position on the relationship between public opinion and the conduct of the war. At one point he suggests that with the licensing act of 1662 all "hope that governments might be converted by force of argument" came to an end, that the government had successfully promoted a "lack of interest in public affairs" (*The Restoration* (Oxford, 1985). p. 157) Then he seems to maintain that public Hollandophobia "had been the decisive factor in the outbreak of full-scale conflict" and prevented the English government from pursuing any peace initiative in

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noticed that "at the heart of England's difficulties was the country's complete loss of appetite for the struggle." This diminution of English popular support was the result not of an altered perception of the ideological stakes in the conflict with the Dutch but rather the consequence of the "crushing losses" sustained by the English mercantile sector.[23]

In almost every historical explanation for the Medway disaster, then, the English lost the economic means rather than the ideological will to continue the war.[24] The English failed to send out a fleet in 1667, Jones has argued, because "financial and material resources neared exhaustion by the end of 1666."[25] "With the navy debt growing and little sign of adequate credit forthcoming," Charles Wilson maintains, "the king listened readily to those of his advisers who preached a doctrine of limited strategic liability."[26] Ronald Hutton, while blaming Parliament for failing to vote supply quickly enough in 1666, has exonerated Charles II for failing to set out a fleet, claiming that "had the government sent forth the fleet for a third year, bankruptcy would probably have resulted." "Unequivocally the Dutch had won," Hutton concludes, "by sheer financial stamina."[27]

Unsurprisingly, with its navy devastated and its political morale at a nadir, Charles II's government quickly acceded to the peace terms offered by the Dutch at Breda. Nevertheless the Dutch were remarkably lenient, demanding very few economic concessions given that they had been victorious in a trade war. The English, Wilson comments, "obtained reasonable terms." "The Treaty of Breda," he concludes, "was glorious as the Revolution of 1688 was glorious – not as an act of conquest and humiliation but of moderation and good sense."[28] Feiling also feels that England's enemies "as a whole gave England much better terms than her administration deserved."[29]

This conclusion of the second Anglo-Dutch War, a war which had been described in such epic terms, seems inexplicably anti-climactic. Why were

1665 or 1666 (pp. 223, 275). But Hutton also insists that, as a result of the plague, "most English people had lost all interest in the war" "long before" the Parliamentary session of 1665 (p. 225).

23 J. Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade 1585–1740* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 277–278.

24 The exception is Paul Seaward's subtle and perceptive study of the Cavalier Parliament (*The Cavalier Parliament and the Reconstruction of the Old Regime 1661–1667* [Cambridge, 1989]). His account, however, discusses exclusively the shift in perceptions of domestic threats to the regime. He does not analyze their European dimensions.

25 Jones, *Britain and the World*, pp. 80–81, 91.

26 Wilson, *Profit and Power*, p. 138. Israel makes a similar argument, p. 278.

27 Hutton, *Restoration*, pp. 257, 261, 275. Feiling also blames the failure to set out a fleet on the delay in voting supply Feiling, *British Foreign Policy*, pp. 205–206. Seaward contests this claim, arguing that the navy's books balanced. The real problem was that the government had precious little credit. Seaward, *The Cavalier Parliament*, pp. 238–239, 303.

28 Wilson, *Profit and Power*, pp. 141–142.

29 Feiling, *British Foreign Policy*, p. 226.

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the Dutch so lenient? I claim that this was because the English and the Dutch conceived of the conflict in terms other than those in which it is usually described. Indeed many of the English voices heard after the descent on Chatham suggest that many new questions should be asked about the conflict. Samuel Pepys, for example, remarked in his diary immediately after the Dutch had destroyed the English ships in dry-dock at Chatham, that the people "do think verily that the French [king], being come down with his army to Dunkirk, it is to invade us – and that we shall be invaded."[30] "It is more than suspected that the French has betrayed us abroad with the conjuncture of those that help them at home," opined Thomas St. Serfe the same day in his newsletter .[31] Full of trepidation Waldine Lagoe wrote from Manchester to his friend Roger Kenyon, exclaiming that "it is feared the French are also coming over from Dunkirk to land in England. 'The Lord in mercy appear for us.' "[32] This popular fear of France in the wake of a Dutch assault on the English navy demands an explanation. This Francophobia, unaccounted for in the traditional accounts of the Anglo-Dutch conflict, reflects a profound shift in English public attitudes toward the war, and necessarily toward their own government. The French entry into the war on the side of the Dutch, coupled with the manifest incompetence of the war effort conducted by an increasingly authoritarian government, convinced a wide spectrum of the English population that French-style absolutism posed at least as great a threat as Dutch-style republicanism to the English way of life. In addition, I suggest, the ostentatious loyalty of the English Nonconformist community in the face of the plague, the Great Fire, and ultimately the Dutch raid on the Medway, marginalized the identification of Nonconformity with rebellious principles. In this new ideological context, a context radically transformed by the English experience during the war, many in England became convinced that Louis XIV desperately wanted to sit atop the throne of the universal monarch.

30 Pepys, *Diary*, Vol. VIII, 13 June 1667, p. 265.
31 St. Serfe's Newsletter, 13 June 1667, LOC, 18124, Vol. I, f. 210r.
32 Waldine Lagoe (Manchester) to Roger Kenyon, 15 June 1667, HMC, *Kenyon*, p. 79.

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