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Historiographical overview

The English, convinced that God had shown his favor towards them in demolishing the tyranny of Charles I and subsequently in defeating the invasion of his son at the head of a Scottish army, could not help but place a special significance on their struggle with the Dutch. The English could be certain that this was no minor squabble, after all the Dutch naval war hero Martin Van Tromp had proclaimed that "no quarter shall be given to the English and that [the Dutch] will revenge themselves with fire and sword." Indeed, the entire Dutch navy had "taken an oath and protestation to live and die together, and to fight it out to the last man."[1] Consequently the importance of the war against the Dutch was clear to a wide variety of observers. "Many eyes are on our breach with Holland," noted the Essex clergyman Ralph Josselin, "God is shaking the earth and he will do it." "So terrible a sea-fight hath not been heard of in the remembrance of any man," commented one pamphleteer after a minor skirmish in August 1652, "the discolored sea showing the effects of their wrath." After the battle of Portland in February 1653, observers had more reason to express wonder at the scale and ferocity of the conflict. "The battle of Lepanto was not comparable to this," thought the Canary merchant John Paige; "there was never the like battle fought upon the salt waters since the creation of the world." The Royalist exile Edward Hyde agreed that "it was the most bloody sea battle that hath been in these last ages." The apocalyptic admiralty secretary Robert Blackborne described the English victory as "that memorable and never to be forgotten appearance" of the Lord.[2]

There could be no doubt, the English thought, that the affairs of all the known world turned on the outcome of their epic struggle with the Dutch. One seaman described a battle with the Dutch as acting "the theater of Europe's tragedy." The battle of Portland, averred the *Weekly Intelligencer*,

1 *French Occurrences*, 5–12 July 1653, p. 66; *A Great Victory Obtained By his Excellency the Lord Gen: Blake* ... (London, 1652), Thomason: 1 July 1652, p. 7.

2 Josselin, *Diary*, 20 June 1652, p. 281; *Terrible and Bloudy Newes From Sea* (London, 1652), Thomason: 6 August 1652, pp. 3–4; John Paige to Paynter and Clerke, 1 March 1653, Steckley, *John Paige*, p. 86; Hyde to Rochester, 4/14 March 1653, Bod., Clar. 45, f. 153r; Robert Blackborne to Captain Badiley, 14 March 1653, CSPD, p. 213.

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"will serve all Christendom for discourse." "All nations are at a stand," wrote one Europe-based observer, "and though working yet, the whole wheel of affairs lies on this business." Not surprisingly, then, when England and the United Provinces began negotiations to end the conflict, many were certain "all Christendom depends on how England and Holland may conclude."[3]

Why, then, did this struggle which contemporaries conceived in such monumental terms come to an end? Did the peace concluded by the Protectorate in April 1654 reflect an achievement of the goals which the Rump had established when it went to war in June 1652?

Historians, unable to agree as to why the war occurred, have similarly disputed its outcome. Even those who are sure the war was an economic struggle disagree as to its conclusion. "When the Dutch refused to allow their colonies to be peacefully incorporated in the British empire," argues Christopher Hill, "the Dutch war was another way to achieve the same end." While acknowledging that Cromwell had ideological differences with the more radical members of Barebones, Hill believes that he continued to support the war on the principle that "the commonwealth should do anything to preserve its trade." Not surprisingly, then, Hill asserts that the Cromwellian peace of 1654 was "not unfavourable to England."[4] Charles Wilson also thinks the war began because "a powerful element in the new government was materialist and anti-Dutch, and the parliamentary party could not ignore the demands of its supporters amongst the London merchants." Since the Rump viewed its conflict with the Dutch as a trade war, "it was sufficient ... to ruin Dutch commerce and thus bring the enemy to his knees." In Wilson's view, Cromwell had always opposed the war as an unChristian conflict against fellow Protestants and did his best to keep the treaty in play against the opposition of the religious radicals. So when he was proclaimed Protector in 1654 Cromwell's peace was "extraordinarily mild." Nevertheless Wilson posits that "the relative magnanimity of the terms could not ... disguise the magnitude of the defeat suffered by the Dutch." Since the war "had fulfilled in the main the prophecies of those who, since Thomas Mun's time, had spoken with confidence of England's chances of victory in a Dutch war," the English merchant community "could look back on the war with some satisfaction."[5] More recently

3 *The Last Bloudy Fight at Sea, Between the English and the Dutch, on Tuesday Last* (London, 1652), Thomason: 27 July 1652, pp. 3–4; *Weekly Intelligencer*, 22 February–1 March 1653, p. 751; newsletter from Dort, 3/13 June 1653, Bod., Rawl. A3, p. 164; Hugh Morrell to Oliver Cromwell, 20/30 December 1653, CSPD, p. 302.

4 Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (New York, 1970), pp. 131, 155–157. It should be noted that Hill also acknowledges the importance of the Protestant cause in Cromwell's foreign policy, but sees the war primarily as an economic struggle. In many cases I find Hill's description of Cromwell's attitude towards the war more persuasive than that of any other modern scholar.

5 Charles H. Wilson, *Profit and Power* (London, 1957), pp. 61–77.

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Jonathan Israel, in his massive study of the *Dutch Primacy in World Trade*, has taken a novel approach. The first Anglo-Dutch War, Israel agrees, "sprang from commercial and maritime conflict." But "Parliament in the end, to obtain peace, was forced to abandon every single one of its economic maritime and colonial demands on the Dutch." In the Baltic, in the Mediterranean, and in Asian Waters, Israel demonstrates, the Dutch were able to drive the English merchants from their trade routes. The result was a complete Dutch victory. "That a war which cost so much in men, ships, and trade should have ended without any tangible gains" for England, Israel concludes, "is the measure of England's failure."[6]

Historians of English domestic politics, who largely emphasize the political nature of the war, have found more ground for agreement. Samuel Rawson Gardiner, who in his magisterial history argues that the maritime conflict was in some sense the first commercial war, feels that its conclusion turned decisively on domestic developments. After the dissolution of the Rump, Gardiner describes Cromwell's position as analogous to "an opposition leader aiming at peace, whilst the recognized authorities were aiming at the continuance of war." It was Cromwell's ideological opposition to the war, coupled with "the financial strain upon the resources of the Commonwealth," which convinced him to conclude a peace with the Dutch as soon as he was named Protector. "The struggle for the command of the North Sea," Gardiner consequently insists, "had certainly not resulted in its complete domination by the English fleet." As a result the Treaty of Westminster reflected in political terms the military ambivalence of the war. But the end of the Dutch War did free Cromwell for more grand designs. Since there was no European power which threatened an "overwhelming predominance," Cromwell could initiate "a policy of aggression calculated on the weakness of one or the other of the leading states." Spain became the object of Cromwell's aggression, Gardiner argues, because it tried to block the Anglo-Dutch peace and because of its failure to tolerate English Protestant merchants within its territories.[7] Charles Korr has found evidence to support Gardiner's argument. Cromwell had always opposed the Anglo-Dutch War "on moral as well as political grounds." So, after the resignation of the Barebones Parliament, Cromwell was "in a position to end the war that he had been willing to accept as long as he was walking a political tightrope between factions in England." Following the Venetian ambassadors, Korr has added that Cromwell and his council were the more anxious for peace because "the war was costing a great deal of money" and because he hoped that putting an end to a long war would increase his own

[6] Jonathan Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade 1585–1740* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 210–213.
[7] S. R. Gardiner, *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate 1649–56* (New York, 1965), Vol. III, pp. 48–83.

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popularity.[8] Austin Woolrych, in his magnificent study of the Nominated Parliament, has come to similar conclusions about the pattern of Anglo-Dutch relations in 1653. Cromwell "strongly desired" peace with the Dutch, but was frustrated in his aims by "an unbroken run of English naval victories, a lack of realism about the terms that the Dutch would accept, and latterly the fanatical lust for universal conquest that consumed the Fifth Monarchist faction." Indeed it was only the hope that Barebones would be dissolved that stopped the Dutch ambassadors from breaking off the treaty in December 1653.[9] Significantly all of these historians explain the conclusion of the war in purely English terms. Perceptions of Dutch politics had little or no effect on diplomatic proceedings because the English negotiators were "inept," lacked "experience," and were "amateurs in the area of foreign policy."[10]

Against these views, I claim that although the English politicians who conducted the negotiations with the Dutch diplomatic team in 1653 and 1654 may have been novices in international relations, they did not come to those negotiations without any conception of international politics. Indeed it was their perception of a decisive change in Dutch politics that prompted Cromwell and his political allies to turn against a war which they had initially supported. This new political insight brought them into direct conflict with the more apocalyptic members of the new Nominated Parliament, and in so doing prompted not only a political revolution in England, but an ideological one as well. The new English government, the Protectorate, was able to dictate the terms of peace with the Dutch because it was clear that the English had won the war. These terms, unsurprisingly, reflected the war aims of the now-triumphant Cromwellian moderates, war aims which had precious little to do with establishing English commercial supremacy. Once in power the Cromwellian moderates rejected notions of apocalyptic foreign policy, just as they had discarded their apocalyptic former colleagues. The Treaty of Westminster, then, represented the end of English apocalyptic foreign policy.

[8] Charles Korr, *Cromwell and the New Model Foreign Policy* (Berkeley, 1975), pp. 76–78.
[9] Austin Woolrych, *Commonwealth to Protectorate* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 277–279, 323–325.
[10] These are the descriptions of Woolrych, *Commonwealth*, p. 279; and Korr, *Cromwell*, p. 78.

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