Oliver Cromwell- Hero or Villain?

Oliver Cromwell ruled from 1653 to 1658. Some believe that he was an evil, hated ruler- although not technically a king- while others believe he was a powerful, firm ruler, who won England many wars. So, the question remains. Was Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, a hero or a villain?

Cromwell as an Army General

He was a very successful war leader, defeating King Charles’ army at the Battle of Naseby with his ‘New Model Army’, which was a professional army, with soldiers chosen on ability, instead of just how important they were in society. However, Cromwell’s son-in-law was promoted easily through the ranks, showing that he didn’t always follow his policy of ‘ability, not nobility’.

I think that in this aspect, he was good, because he was successful, and didn’t treat people better due to social status (most of the time, his son-in-law was an exception to this).

Cromwell and the Trial of King Charles I

Cromwell was one of the main people arguing for the trial and death of King Charles, along with a lot of the Parliamentarian soldiers. However, despite this, Cromwell was not against monarchy, he was just against Charles, and the fact that Charles had worked with the Scots. However, some say that the trial was a farce, that it was all done by the army. They said that there was ‘a special place in hell reserved for him.

Here, he was both good and bad. Because although Charles wasn’t a very good king, he still wasn’t bad enough to deserve to be killed.

Cromwell and Liberty

Although Cromwell did want to get rid of King Charles, he still believed that society should still be split into the upper, middle, and lower classes. There were groups, such as the Levellers, who wanted democracy and equality, but Cromwell had 4 members of the Levellers shot at Burford in 1649. He also kept dismissing Parliament if they disagreed with him- which is one of the big things that he disliked about the previous king’s reign. Although he said that he ‘loved liberty’ he still supported an ordered society.

Here, he was being a bit two-faced, one minute saying he loved liberty and freedom, the next still promoting ordered society, where rich and high-ranking people were in charge, with no choices made by ordinary people, then back to ‘loving liberty’ when it suited him to.

Cromwell as Lord Protector

Cromwell used the power he had through the army to dismiss Parliament (doing one of the things that was used against Charles I) and became the Lord Protector. This meant he had the power of a king, but without technically being one. He then created a new parliament, and ruled England with the power of the army, despite not having any claim to the throne except power. Two years later, he put 12 Major-Generals around England to keep an iron fist control over the country. These Major-Generals put in many new laws, banning taverns, dancing, drunkenness and even- the most inexcusable of all- he cancelled Christmas!

In this section, he was again being a hypocrite, dethroning King Charles for dismissing parliament, then doing just that himself. As well, he cancelled Christmas. End of story.

Cromwell and the Crown

Some people tried to get Cromwell to accept the crown and become an official king, to try and give him more power over the people, other than military power. However, he refused in 1657. This could be genuine, such as not wanting to become like Charles, because then, what would have been the point of replacing him in the first place? However, it could be that he was forced into refusing, because the army didn’t want him to become king.

With this point, he was neither good nor bad, because we don’t know for sure why he refused the throne. However, I think that he refused because the army made him, instead of out of conscience.

Cromwell and Ireland

Cromwell went to Ireland with the army to stop the Irish rebellion in 1649. He did stop it, crushing the Irish, ruthlessly killing soldiers, men, women and children alike, to keep the country in his control. It is even said that he ordered his men to take an Irish baby then nail it to a church door as a warning to all of the other Irish Catholics. Even today, he still has a bad reputation in Ireland, even being used to frighten naughty children with threats that Oliver would come and get them if they were bad. Here, although he was successful, he was far too vicious, killing innocent men, women and children as well as the rebel soldiers he was fighting against. A prime example of this is the Irish baby he nailed to the church door.

Cromwell’s Death

In 1658, Oliver Cromwell was killed by overwork, stress, and malaria- which, in a sense of fitting karma, came from Ireland, like a punishment for everything that happened there. After monarchy was finally restored in 1660, his corpse was dug from his grave and beheaded, with his head on display to everyone, on the end of a pike.

Cromwell’s Reputation Since Death

* In 1702, the Earl of Clarendon said that ‘Cromwell took more power than Charles had ever used’. This says that Cromwell, despite acting like he wasn’t a tyrant by not actually being king, still took a lot of power, more than Charles. This was written at a time where it could be possible that the Earl was around when Cromwell was Lord Protector, or at least knew people who were around then.
* In 1903, Samuel Gardener said that Cromwell was ‘The greatest and most typical of Englishmen’. This said the opposite to the last one, that he was a very good man, and the ideal Englishman. However, this was written much later, when all they knew about Cromwell was what had been recorded, not first-hand information.
* In 1970, Christopher Hill said that ‘he was a fiery fighter for freedom and a clever politician’. This is somewhere in between, because although fighter for freedom sounds good, fiery might mean that he was short-tempered when it came to this topic. Also, clever politician could be either good or bad, as cleverness could be used for good, but it could also be used for bad.

Conclusion

So, Oliver Cromwell was a strong war leader, which was shown by his success in war, although a bit too aggressive, as shown by the Irish baby incident. Despite him refusing to be called king, I believe that he did want to be king, but the army would not let him. He still acted like a king too, supposedly taking more power than Charles did, and even doing one of the things he was killed for: closed down Parliament, for the same reason as Charles, that they weren’t agreeing with what he wanted. He was lying in another aspect of his reign, too. He said repeatedly that he loved liberty, then changed to supporting ordered society. This might mean that he was lying about other things as well. So, he was good for somethings, but bad for others, and probably more bad than good. However, the worst thing he did… was cancel Christmas! This just proves my opinion. Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, was (despite being strong military leader) a villain.