The story of the Great Fire of London, Samuel Pepys's account, and Christopher Wren rebuilding of London. If it was carelessness, it was carelessness that had enormous and disastrous consequences, for the fire spread and soon the whole building was alight. In the close-packed streets of London, where buildings jostled each other for space, the blaze soon became an inferno. Fanned by an east wind, the fire spread with terrifying speed, feeding on the tar and pitch commonly used to seal houses. Pepys' View Our best account of the Fire comes from the diaries of Samuel Pepys, Secretary of the Admiralty. He watched the course of the destruction from a safe position across the Thames, and called it The Great Fire of London happened in Central London in 1666. The fire lasted for three days, from 2 September until 5 September. It is believed to have destroyed the homes of 70,000 of the 80,000 people that lived in the city. It is not known how many people died in the fire. Only a few deaths are certain, but for many of the victims there were no records. Also, the fire may have cremated many, leaving no recognisable remains. It threatened the aristocratic district of Westminster (the modern West End).
disaster. It occurred at a critical moment in English history, only six years after the restoration of the monarchy ended decades of civil war and political turmoil. When the fire broke out in September 1666, King Charles II was struggling to resolve the many problems that had been facing England since he was restored to the throne. This paper examines
how the Great Fire of London affected, and was affected by, the many political and social issues that existed in England at the time. I discuss how the fire inflamed existing political dissent and religious tensions, exacerbated the King’s financial troubles, and led to English defeat in the Second Anglo-Dutch War. By explaining how the fire
made many of these problems intractable, I argue that the Great Fire of London severely impaired Charles II's ability to govern. Because it diverted resources and weakened government resolve at a critical moment, the fire made it nearly impossible for Charles II to resolve the myriad of problems that had been plaguing his reign since the Restoration.
Introduction

The Great Fire of London was a major humanitarian disaster. In the first week of September 1666, the city was almost completely gutted by flames. The damage devastated the City of London, which the plague had already ravaged the year before. The fire turned many citizens into refugees and disrupted the economy of the entire nation. It was such a traumatic experience for the city that it still lingers in the historical imagination. However, a story of the Great Fire which discusses only the physical destruction and human suffering it caused would be incomplete. The fire was not an isolated incident. Many of
the issues facing England in the mid-seventeenth century either affected or were affected by the Great Fire of London. Throughout the 1660s, the government of King Charles II grappled with several social and political issues, such as the legacy of the English Civil War, religious dissent, inadequate sources of government revenue, and a war with the Dutch Republic. The Great Fire of London made addressing all these problems more difficult by exacerbating existing tensions and diverting the government’s resources to handle the aftermath of the fire. As a result, the fire not only devastated the City of London; it also proved detrimental to Charles II’s reign and increased instability throughout England.

Political
By far the most dangerous issue facing Charles II’s government was the legacy of the Civil War that ravaged England two decades prior. The execution of Charles I by the victorious Parliamentary Army cast a long shadow over his son’s reign. Although political necessity forced Charles II to pardon many officials who had served the Commonwealth after the Restoration, this forgiveness did not extend to the men who had ordered his father’s death. Most of them were executed for treason. In addition, Charles II’s first Parliament “ordered that the corpses of Cromwell, Ireton, and Bradshaw be exhumed and displayed, as an awful warning of the consequences of rebellion.”[1] This display of
the regicides’ severed heads, intended to dissuade rebellion, was deemed necessary because of continued dissent.
Although Charles II’s return to the throne was celebrated jubilantly by the English people, their enthusiasm began to fade as realities of Restoration government became apparent.[2] Pockets of support for a return to the Commonwealth soon emerged, mostly among former Parliamentarians and groups disadvantaged by Charles II’s policies, such as religious nonconformists.[3] These proponents of a revival of the Commonwealth, which they referred to as the “Good Old Cause,” organized several plots against the King throughout the early 1660s. For
example, in January 1661, Thomas Venner led 50 men into revolt in an attempt to topple the government. This rebellion was a futile effort, and it resulted in Venner and several of his followers being executed and the mounting of their heads beside those of the aforementioned regicides.[4] Although Venner’s Rising never seriously threatened the government, it did demonstrate the animosity dissenters felt towards Charles II. On January 1, 1661, when a captured rebel was interrogated, “he said that he and others would spend their last blood before the King should come into England.”[5]

The tensions created by these plots were especially pronounced in London because of the role the
city had played in the English Civil War. Neil Hanson describes London as “the heart of the revolution against Charles I... and the scene of the regicide.”[6] London had also been the site of several plots against Charles II, including Venner’s Rising. More recently, there had been a plot based in London in which eight former Parliamentarian Officers had conspired to kill the King and take control of the government. This plot was suppressed in April 1666, and all the conspirators were executed for treason.[7] Inextricably linked to this tension between Charles II and his capital was the people of London’s desire to maintain their traditional privileges. London had always enjoyed a degree of autonomy in its local
Traditionally, the reigning monarch was not even allowed to enter the city walls unless he received permission from the Lord Mayor and the leaders of the Corporation of London. Although Charles II was wary of London and its traditional privileges, he was forced by political necessity to accept them.[8] One consequence of his acceptance was that it was difficult for Charles II to order soldiers into the city. Hanson writes that, although Londoners were willing to accept the presence of soldiers in the city during an emergency, such as Venner’s Rising, if there was not sufficient justification for the presence of soldiers they would be “confronted by the citizens uniting against
them."

On the eve of the fire, London still enjoyed its traditional autonomy, and the memory of the English Civil War still loomed large in the popular imagination.

**Religious Tensions**

Closely associated with the legacy of the English Civil War was the problem posed by religious dissenters. While awaiting the Restoration, Charles II issued the Declaration of Breda, which among other things promised religious freedom to his future subjects on the condition that they remain loyal. However, this was not a promise the King would keep. After he was restored to the throne, Charles II reestablished episcopacy and “the Anglican Establishment clamped down quickly on nonconformity.
and well over 2,000 clergy and university lecturers and fellows were ejected from their livings and deprived of their posts between 1660 and 1662.”[11] These nonconformists included a diverse array of sects, from Independents and Presbyterians to more radical Baptists and Quakers. They also included the extremely radical Fifth Monarchists, the sect to which Thomas Venner belonged. Adrian Tinniswood explains, “Many of the Dissenters... were temperamentally inclined towards the Good Old Cause and against the monarchy, which had after all ejected them from their livings, restored the Anglican hierarchy and introduced Papists into the royal household.”[12] Because of their sympathies for
the Commonwealth and aversion to the monarchy, Charles II considered nonconformists a threat to his power, resulting in a mutual distrust. Thus, another point of tension between Charles II and his capital was that religious dissenters “were clearly very numerous in London.”[13]

Writing in November 1662, the famous diarist and naval administrator Samuel Pepys recalled tensions between the Anglican Establishment and the City of London because “the City... is not to be reconciled to Bishopps [sic].”[14]

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Religious dissenters’ reputation in London significantly improved during the Great Plague,
which swept through the city a year before the Great Fire. While the Anglican clergy fled the city for fear of the plague, dissenting ministers stayed behind to preach to its victims. According to Adrian Tinniswood, by staying behind they “earned the respect of Londoners.”[15]

The increasing prestige of religious nonconformists in London made Charles II’s government uneasy. This led to the passage of the Five Mile Act, which forbade dissenting ministers “to come within five miles of any parish in which they had previously preached, or any city, town or parliamentary borough at all.”[16] This act soon proved to be a misstep, because its main effect was to alienate further religious nonconformists from the King’s government. The
Five Mile Act led many of them to believe, if they were not convinced already, that their best hope for tolerance lay with the Good Old Cause.[17] Another point of contention between Charles II’s government and the religious nonconformists was the presence of Catholics within the royal household. There was still a prominent Catholic circle at court surrounding Charles II’s mother, Henrietta Maria, and his wife, Queen Catherine of Braganza. These relations were bound to arouse opposition because of the historic prominence of anti-Catholic sentiment in England, which was not confined to religious dissenters. As John Miller writes in his biography of Charles II, to the people of England, Catholicism “was
not just another religion, but the quintessence of evil and degeneracy.” [18]

Charles II’s decision to pursue a policy of repression towards religious dissenters, combined with the presence of Catholics in his family, greatly increased unrest in England in the lead up to the fire.

**Financial Troubles**

Another problem Charles II struggled with throughout his reign was finding the money to finance his administration. After the Restoration, both Charles II and Parliament agreed that the exploitative and questionably legal taxes his father had levied would not be revived during his reign. As Parliament moved to permanently abolish some of the revenue sources abused by Charles I,
such as the Court of Wards, it attempted to compensate for their loss by providing Charles II with new tax grants to fund his government.[19] Unfortunately, Parliament underestimated how much funding the government would require. For the first several years of Charles II’s reign, he constantly struggled to find sufficient revenue. When this funding gap was brought to the attention of later Parliaments, they refused to grant the King any permanent tax increases, in part because, as Miller writes, “they would not surrender the bargaining power given them by the king’s financial weakness.”[20] The struggle to finance his government further complicated the tense relationship between Charles
II and his capital, because London merchants were a key source of loans for the King.[21]

Ultimately, Charles II’s lack of funds forced him to make decisions that were very unpopular with the English people. Charles II repeatedly asked King Louis XIV of France for loans. Additionally, in 1662, he sold Louis XIV the port city of Dunkirk, which had come under English control during the Commonwealth, for the sum of 5,000,000 Livres.[22] The sale of Dunkirk “proved bitterly unpopular” among the English people, to the point that there was an attempt to impeach Lord Chancellor Edward Hyde, the Earl of Clarendon for proposing it.[23]

In a diary entry written on October 19, 1662, Samuel Pepys recalled with regret “that the
The Anglo-Dutch War

Charles II’s financial struggles were made even more difficult to resolve by his decision to prosecute a war against the Dutch Republic. By the mid-1660s, Oliver Cromwell’s victory over the Dutch in the First Anglo-Dutch War was only a decade old. Since then, tensions between the English and the Dutch had continued to rise. The English passed the first Navigation Acts to restrict trade within their empire, while the Dutch attempted to block English access to the East Indies.[25] Before the war was officially declared in early 1665, conflict had already broken out between English and
Dutch ships off the coast of Africa and in the Mediterranean.[26] In accordance with an existing defense treaty between France and the Dutch Republic, Louis XIV joined the war on the side of the Dutch, despite Charles II’s repeated attempts to convince him to remain neutral.[27] At the outset of hostilities, Parliament voted Charles II £2,500,000 to finance the war effort.[28] However, this lump sum was quickly consumed. The war soon disrupted trade, and Charles II’s government found itself struggling to finance the war and his administration. Writing on December 31, 1665, Samuel Pepys explained that “The Dutch war goes on very ill, by reason of lack of money.”[29] Initially, the fighting seemed to favor the
English. In June 1665, James, Duke of York, had been put in charge of the war effort and he “won a striking victory” at the battle of Lowestoft.[30] Then in August 1666, Sir Robert Holmes, Rear-Admiral of the Red, captured the Dutch town of West-Terschelling, looted it and burned it down before withdrawing.[31] However, neither of these engagements was decisive. At the beginning of September 1666, the main Dutch fleet remained undefeated and the war continued, putting an ever-increasing strain on the royal treasury.

The Fire

Although the many issues facing his kingdoms remained unresolved as September 1666 began, Charles II’s government had to turn its attention to a
new disaster. On Sunday, September 2, 1666, in the early hours of the morning, a fire broke out in a bakery on Pudding Lane in southeastern London. A strong wind blowing northwest spread the fire quickly. Its spread was aided by the fact that the summer had been very dry; furthermore, most houses in London had frames made of timber. During the early stages of the blaze, the city’s leadership showed itself to be ineffective. Sir Thomas Bludworth, the Lord Mayor of London, refused to begin pulling down buildings, then considered the best way to prevent the spread of fire. He also refused Charles II’s offer that royal troops be allowed to enter the city to help fight the fire. In both cases, the Lord Mayor made his decision because
By Tuesday, September 4, the fire had encompassed almost the entire city of London. It had even spread beyond the city walls to the west, causing many to fear that the fire would reach the Palace of Whitehall. On Wednesday, September 5, Samuel Pepys described the scene as “the saddest sight of desolation that I ever saw; everywhere great fires, oyle-cellar, and brimstone, and other things burning.”

Before the fire reached this critical point, Charles II had granted his brother, James, Duke of York, control of the city in place of the Lord Mayor. James quickly ordered royal troops into the city, authorized the demolition of property to prevent the fire’s spread, and set up fire stations around the city.
that were tasked with stopping the blaze.\[37\]
James personally visited each station to manage the firefighting effort, and his conduct during the fire was rewarded with “the greatest praise, for his ability to keep his head in a crisis [and] his determination to stop the fire.”\[38\]
Eventually the flames were contained, and, as the wind died down, the flames died down with it. On Thursday, September 6, the Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, who had been ordered to muster the local militia in case they were needed in London, received a report that said, “the raging fire is now abated.”\[39\] By then, however, London was a changed city. The fire had caused a surprisingly small number of deaths, but the physical damage was considerable.\[40\]
Many of London’s public buildings, such as St. Paul’s Cathedral, the Royal Exchange, and several of the city’s guildhalls, had burned down.[41] In addition, over 13,200 houses had been destroyed, and between 70,000 and 80,000 people were now homeless.[42] The damage was so great that on September 8, Sir Geoffrey Shakerley, the governor of Chester Castle, reported that “All are in amazement at the heavy judgement fallen on London, which is concluded to be a total devastation and destruction of the metropolis.”[43]

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*Diplomatic and Military Consequences*

Although
relatively few perished in the fire, many would suffer in a subsequent outbreak of xenophobic violence. Londoners were notoriously distrustful of foreigners, and the fire broke out amid the tense atmosphere of an ongoing war. As a result, soon many began to suspect that the Dutch and French residents of the city had started the fire purposefully as revenge for the burning of West-Terschelling.\[44\] According to Walter George Bell, many people believed "that the conflagration was begun by a Dutch baker, who was bribed to do this work, and that the French went about scattering fireballs in the houses."\[45\] These rumors spread rapidly, and soon mobs of Londoners began seizing anyone who seemed foreign, beating them,
and in some cases lynching them.[46] Adrian Tinniswood writes that by Tuesday, September 4, “Any foreigners stupid enough to walk out on the streets of London... were in more danger from the mob than the flames.”[47] The Duke of York and his royal soldiers attempted to protect innocent foreigners from mob violence, and they managed to save several from lynchings.[48] However, this protection would come back to haunt James. Despite his admirable conduct during the fire, his protection of foreigners would be used as evidence against him during the Exclusion Crisis over a decade later.[49] Mob attacks on foreigners caused problems for the government both domestically and internationally. The violence perpetrated
against foreigners would feature prominently in several accounts of the fire published abroad, which severely damaged England’s reputation.[50] This proved detrimental to the ongoing English war effort against the Dutch Republic and France.

Beyond this reputational damage, the fire had a far more direct and disastrous impact on England’s ability to wage war. The fire had depleted English morale, and the government was in disarray. The Parliament, which met shortly after the fire, was thoroughly dissatisfied with government conduct and “bemoaned the mismanagement of the war effort.”[51] Charles II eventually convinced the MPs to grant him more money for
the war but only after he promised to account for previous war expenditures.[52] With England in dire straits, peace negotiations soon began. However, these negotiations stalled in early 1667, and the Dutch fleet launched a surprise attack into the Medway in the Thames estuary, burning many ships and capturing the English flagship *Royal Charles.*[53] This defeat provoked public anger about how poorly the war effort was being managed. In a letter written in June 1667, Sir Geoffry Shakerley recounted that “The late dishonour received from the Dutch has much perplexed all, and made some say we were asleep, or we should have fortified ourselves against such an attempt, knowing the enemy near.”[54] Shortly
thereafter, the Treaty of Breda was signed, ending the conflict in exchange for minor English territorial concessions. The disastrous conclusion of the Second Anglo-Dutch War caused such public outrage that Charles II decided to dismiss his Lord Chancellor, the Earl of Clarendon, blaming him for the government’s lacking conduct.[55] Public animosity was so great that, in the following months, Parliament voted to impeach Clarendon and to banish him from England in perpetuity.[56]

Economic Fallout

Along with bringing the war with the Dutch to a swift and calamitous conclusion, the fire made the problem of financing the government almost
intractable. London had been England’s principal trading and manufacturing hub, and its destruction diminished the government’s tax revenues just as its expenses were increasing. After the Dutch raid on the Medway, the state of the King’s finances was so desperate that some of Charles II’s councilors seriously advised him to raise an army and collect new taxes without Parliamentary approval. On July 12, 1667, Samuel Pepys commented on these suggestions by saying, “the design is... to have a land-army, and so to make the government like that of France, but our princes have not brains, or at least care and forecast enough to do that.” As rumors of this plan spread, they aroused stern opposition and
discontent from Parliament and the public. In the end, Charles II decided against arbitrary taxation. After appeasing Parliament with several measures, including the dismissal of Clarendon, the King finally managed to secure the passage of a new tax on imported wine and spirits. This tax kept the government solvent for the moment.[59] However, the problem of sufficient royal finance was far from resolved. The fact that the King’s councilors were willing to suggest illegal taxes enforced with arms showed just how serious the problem had become.

In addition to financing the Kingdom’s administration and the war, Charles II’s government faced the additional challenge of securing funds
for the reconstruction of London. Although homeowners and tenants would be held responsible for rebuilding their own properties, the government still had to finance the reconstruction of the many destroyed public buildings. The government also had to enforce new building regulations instituted after the fire, such as wider streets and a ban on timber frames.\[60\] In the weeks after the fire, many homeless residents left the city for the towns surrounding it, and the government considered it critical to begin reconstruction “before the population of London dispersed to such an extent that it would never come back.”\[61\] In February 1667, Parliament partially remedied this
problem when it passed *An Act for Rebuilding the City of London*, which enshrined the new building regulations in law and imposed a tax on coal shipped into London. The proceeds of this tax would be used to fund the city’s reconstruction.[62]

As reconstruction finally began, however, the impact of the government’s financial constraints was made evident yet again. Several proposals were put forward to re-design the city’s layout. One of these was a particularly innovative plan created by the renowned architect Christopher Wren, who had a “deeply thought-out sense of how a modern city should function.”[63] In the end, all re-design plans, including Wren’s, were rejected because of financial and logistical constraints, and
the city was rebuilt with only minor changes to its layout.[64]

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Effects on Politics and Religion

The fire also served to exacerbate existing religious and political tensions. The wave of xenophobic violence that the fire unleashed quickly took on an anti-Catholic hue, which would color the narrative of the event for years to come. In 1681, during the Exclusion Crisis, a plaque was erected in Pudding Lane to commemorate the fire, with an inscription claiming it was started deliberately by Catholic terrorists.[65] The fire also
increased tensions between the Anglican establishment and religious nonconformists. Just as they had during the Great Plague, dissenting ministers stayed in the city when the fire broke out while the Anglican Clergy fled, increasing Londoners’ respect for the dissenters and their faith.[66] This religious tension was inextricably linked to political tensions because of the sympathy many nonconformists harbored for the Good Old Cause. Their association with dissent was also a liability, however, and many nonconforming ministers took the lead in blaming Catholics for the fire in part to deflect suspicion from themselves.[67] Charles II attempted to appease religious dissidents by pushing for Parliament to
pass a religious comprehension bill. Parliament, however, was averse to dissenters, and the bill was defeated.[68] This failure exemplified both the depth of religious tension in England and the government’s inability to find a settlement that would satisfy either side of the religious divide. Religious tensions in England would continue unabated for the rest of Charles II’s reign and beyond.

The legacy of the English Civil War, and the political tensions associated with it, weighed on Charles II’s mind as the fire died down. With many people now homeless and mobs roaming the streets, there was major potential for social unrest. To prevent a potential upheaval, Charles II called General George
Monck, Duke of Albemarle, back from his command of the English fleet to address the situation in the capital. Monck was a very popular figure because of his role in restoring the monarchy and his conduct in government ever since, so much so that Hanson describes him as “a man who commanded far greater public confidence and respect than [the King] himself.”[69]

Although Monck’s presence did help to calm potential unrest, it seemed unnecessary in the days following the fire, as no major revolts against the government took place. Most Londoners had already placed the blame for the fire on foreigners, not Charles II, and many dissenting preachers were too wary of government reprisals to blame the King.
However, officials within the government itself actually increased political tensions in the aftermath of the disaster, as “tactless courtiers rejoiced at the Fire, claiming that the city would now be less able to resist the king’s will.” These careless remarks demonstrated that the fire had not destroyed the existing tensions between the King and his capital. Despite the lack of an open rebellion against the King, the Great Fire of London did contribute to an increase in the religious and political tensions that had been plaguing Charles II since the earliest days of his reign.

Conclusion

Overall, the Great Fire of London severely hindered the success of Charles II’s reign. Beyond
being a humanitarian disaster, the fire exacerbated many problems the King was already struggling to solve. Because of the fire, issues like unresolved political and religious tensions, insufficient government revenue, and an ongoing war with the Dutch became intractable. This was because the fire diverted resources and weakened the government’s resolve at a critical moment. As a result, the fire’s damage was far more extensive than the list of properties burned, because many of these issues would continue to plague Charles II for the remainder of his reign. Many of these controversies would remain unresolved until the Glorious Revolution brought his brother James II’s reign to an
end two decades later.

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Acknowledgements:
I would like to thank Dr. Kirk Willis, Tracy Barnett, Noah
Coriell, and Julie List for their assistance in researching and editing this paper.

CITATION STYLE: CHICAGO

APRIL 21, 2020
CHARLES II, GREAT
FIRE OF LONDON