

## *Propaganda and the First Battle of St Albans, 1455*

It is the awesome responsibility of historians to depict the past and the characters of the past as they really were, warts and all. Is this not a rather presumptuous exercise now that we realize that it is seldom the real president, prime minister or secretary-general that appears on our television screens, but rather a product or an image that has been artificially manufactured? Richard M. Nixon's deleted expletives, Kurt Waldheim's expurgated past, and the modifications to Margaret Thatcher's voice, John Major's teeth, and Tony Blair's hair are aspects of the processes of adaptation, creation, and re-creation that now employ whole teams of public relations officers, speech-writers, couturiers, coiffeurs, spin-doctors and advertisers. What we see is not reality. It is an image designed to appeal to and shape public opinion and win elections. Fortunately for democracy, there are today many others professionally concerned to dispel and discredit such images. They give access to alternative official and journalistic sources almost as each image is created.

The distant past, such as the Wars of the Roses, is quite different: not because deceptive images were not created and because misleading information was not disseminated, as was once presumed, but because independent evidence seldom survives or suffices to counter the artificial images. Too often the slanted manifestoes, the one-sided reports, and the official cover-ups are all we have and are indeed what we value most: they are almost the only sources that clearly identify the issues at stake and the motives of participants. The propaganda is also one-sided and biased at each stage towards the victors. How can fifteenth-century historians seriously claim to penetrate the image to the reality that lies beyond?

Historians now appreciate that chronicles and manifestoes have more messages to impart than mere assemblages of information. Much scholarly effort has been directed into establishing authentic texts and identifying which 'side' each narrator takes.<sup>1</sup> We are aware that chroniclers, versifiers, and reporters were addressing audiences that they wished to influence. We recognize that they were presenting a message advantageous to themselves, usually more favourable than the facts, and that they were tailoring it to the conventions, principles, prejudices and self-interest of their audience. It is obvious that the increase in

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1 M. A. Hicks, 'The Sources', *The Wars of the Roses*, ed. A. J. Pollard (Basingstoke, 1996), 21-9. For recent studies on propaganda and public opinion, see esp. D. McCulloch and E. D. Jones, 'Lancastrian Politics, the French War and the Rise of the Popular Element', *Speculum* lviii (1983), 95-138; I. M. W. Harvey, 'Was there Popular Politics in Fifteenth-Century England?', *The McFarlane Legacy*, ed. A. J. Pollard & R. Britnell (Stroud, 1995), 155-74.

propagandist pieces was designed to exploit and stimulate the participation of non-aligned observers and the public opinion that modern historians are anxious to chart.

Generalisations of this kind are easy. Demonstrating their relevance in specific cases is much more difficult. Rarely do we know who precisely was the target audience for a particular publication. When we do, we can do little more than guess how widely appreciated were the rhetorical devices, Latin refrains, heraldic badges, or constitutional principles that were employed, and hence how 'good' the propaganda was. Seldom do we have more than one version of any populist piece, any knowledge of how many copies were originally produced, how they were disseminated, or of their success. There are no opinion polls or election results as guides. But much more can be made of the message. The manifestoes themselves can be subjected to further analysis, to establish what bias has been introduced into the facts, what was being added and what omitted, and how the message itself was changing over time. In each case we can deduce why. We can thus come closer to the intentions of the propagandists and in some cases also to their achievement, since it was their image that came to be accepted and that presumably vanquished alternative interpretations.

These observations apply even to the best documented events, such as the first battle of St Albans 1455, the initial battle of the Wars of Roses. En route from London to a Great Council at Leicester in the east midlands on the Thursday before Whitsunday, King Henry VI and his court were intercepted by three Yorkist lords and their retinues: Richard, duke of York, Richard, earl of Salisbury, and the latter's son Richard, earl of Warwick. A battle was fought on 22 May in the streets and market place of St Albans, the county town of Hertfordshire and the site of a great Benedictine abbey dedicated to St Alban, the first Christian martyr. The Yorkist lords were victorious. They captured the king and control of the government. Three prominent Lancastrian noblemen were slain: Edmund, duke of Somerset, Henry, earl of Northumberland, and John, lord Clifford. The battle was the subject of a celebrated study by John Armstrong, which said in 72 pages the last word on most aspects of the episode. Armstrong was able to draw on no less than six contemporary accounts, to which he arbitrarily attached names such as the *Stow Relation* and the *Fastolf Relation*; on the *Parliamentary Pardon*, through which the victorious Yorkists officially exculpated themselves from responsibility; and on numerous chronicle narratives and supplementary record evidence. Since he wrote, two other significant sources have turned up: a third version of the *Stow Relation* and the *Chronicle of John Benet*. Armstrong's classic remains unchallenged. Every successive commentator pays tribute to its quality. As an account of the battle it will not be superseded.

However Armstrong was concerned primarily to establish what happened and why: the causes and events of the battle. To this end, he examined each of his narratives for reliability and bias in what was a model investigation for his time. He made pertinent

observations about the development of what became the historical orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> Such aspects were not his prime objective or focus. His sources are useful for purposes other than his own. In particular, several of them represent successive versions of the official Yorkist point of view, which changed several times as the victors revised the message that they wished to promulgate. These relations were not mere history, but exercises in propaganda which, incidentally, involved falsifying events. Moreover their value is not limited to establishing what happened before and during the battle; they had a role also in conditioning popular attitudes to the rebellion and in shaping subsequent events, both in 1455 and much later on. In 1458-9 the Yorkists resented the re-opening of issues that they considered had been closed by the *Parliamentary Pardon*. A further study thus contributes to the history of politics subsequent to the battle.<sup>3</sup>

This paper has the limited objective of distinguishing the successive recensions of the Yorkist narratives, of delineating the purpose of each version, of identifying the changes, and of explaining why they happened. In the process, it is hoped to cast some new light on wider issues by approaching events through the Yorkists' own documents and by considering the shifting interpretations that they chose to present.

There are five different sources for the official Yorkist versions of events that are discussed below. These are as follows:

- 1 The two letters of the Yorkist lords written on 20 May to the chancellor Archbishop Bourchier for transmission to the king and on 21 May to the king himself. The second letter enclosed a copy of the first.<sup>4</sup>
- 2 The 'petitions, requestes et demandes' that were discussed by York and Buckingham in the *Fastolf Relation*.<sup>5</sup>
- 3 Three variants of the *Stow Relation* labelled here as the Stonor variant, the Vale variant, and the Stow variant.<sup>6</sup>

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2 C. A. J. Armstrong, 'Politics and the Battle of St Albans, 1455', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, xxxiii (1960), 1-72 [reprinted in his collected essays, *England, France and Burgundy in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1983), 1-72].

3 This is explored in M. A. Hicks, *Warwick the Kingmaker* (Oxford, 1998), ch. 6.

4 *R[olls of] P[arliament]* (6 vols. London, 1767-77), v. 280-1.

5 Armstrong, 'St Albans', 3, 10, 66.

6 *The Paston Letters 1422-1509*, ed. J. Gairdner (6 vols., London, 1904), iii. 25-9; John Stow, *Annales of England* (1600), 658-61; *The Politics of Fifteenth-Century England: John Vale's Book*, ed. M. L. Kekewich, A. F. Sutton, C. F. Richmond, L. Visser-Fuchs & J. L. Watts (London, 1995), 190-3.

4 The version of events embedded in the *Phillipps Relation*.<sup>7</sup>

5 The *Parliamentary Pardon* enacted at the session of parliament of 9-31 July 1455, which blamed the battle on the duke of Somerset, Thomas Thorpe and William Joseph.<sup>8</sup>

This paper looks at each in turn and then draws some conclusions.

## II

The letter of 20 May 1455 was dated at Royston in Hertfordshire and was sent to Lord Chancellor Bouchier by York, Salisbury, and Warwick. It responded to rumours that unfavourable conclusions were being drawn about their armed assembly and progress towards the king by those about him who did not put his interests first. They wanted to end such 'doubtes and ambiguitees'. The three lords stated that they were loyal and had no intention of acting against the king. Having heard of the forthcoming council at Leicester that had been summoned, 'as we conceyue ... for seurte of his moost noble person' against others unknown, they intended to provide protection for the king himself in accordance with their allegiance. They needed their armed retinues to protect themselves from their enemies about the king who were also armed. They declared that a secret council recently held at Westminster to which they had not been invited had sought to create 'a jealousie had ayenst us', which they intended to dispel by declaring their 'trouth, duetee and ligeaunce to oure said Sovereine Lord'. They asked Archbishop Bouchier to arrange for the proclamation of excommunication of those intending ill to the king at St Paul's Cross in London and 'thurgh all the parties of this lond'. They requested him to show the letter to the king and to the lords of the royal council. Finally:

we desire & pray you to put you in such devoir, as it belongeth you of your duetee to God, to our said Sovereain Lord, and his said land, and to us and that if any inconvenient mowe fall, that God defende, noo charge or burdon be leyed upon you.

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7 *Paston Letters*, iii, 29-30.

8 *RP*, v, 280-2.

The second letter was dated 21 May at Ware (Herts.) and addressed to the king. It too complained of the 'ambiguitees' about their 'feyth, liegaunce and dewtee' fraudulently spread by the enemies 'undre the wynges of your Mageste Roiall'. The lords declared their loyalty and their intention to come to him as humble liegemen dedicated to his honour, welfare and surety. They asked Henry to accept and repute them as such and not to pay attention to the sinister comments of their enemies. Finally, they reported writing to the archbishop the day before, but, uncertain whether the king had seen it, they sent a copy of the original letter.<sup>9</sup>

Taken individually or together, these are the letters of loyal subjects, who wish to assert their innocence and loyalty, to serve the king, and in particular to protect his person. The second letter, addressed to the king himself, is particularly fulsome in its humble expressions of loyalty. Both letters are critical of their unnamed enemies about the king, the latter particularly so. The first ends with a veiled threat. The second adds very little, as befits a covering letter for the first. It merely makes more explicit the request to the king to 'accept and repute them as loyal liegemen'. Neither make any further requests, for example that their enemies should be removed from court or tried, though, on the precedent of 1450, this could have been the next stage once their loyalty had been acknowledged.<sup>10</sup>

The first missive does not appear to be urgent or to demand an answer. It purports to be merely a letter to the chancellor. It could be regarded as simply a letter of reassurance: don't worry, our intentions are not hostile. But events show this reaction to be mistaken. Instead it needs to be seen in its immediate context. The archbishop, the king, and the council were together at London or Westminster. The Yorkist lords intended coming to the king with an armed force and did not wish to be resisted as traitors or perhaps refused admittance to the City. That makes better sense both of the urgency of action demanded of Bouchier and of their request for proclamations of their innocence and loyalty at St Paul's Cross. The Yorkist lords may quite literally have meant no more than that armed resistance could result in unnecessary bloodshed. That said, the intention of the Yorkist lords was surely to coerce the king by armed demonstrations: in London, where they were strong, not at Leicester, where they could expect to be at a disadvantage. The *Dijon Relation* says that it was in view of his unpopularity in London that Somerset decided to set out towards

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9 Ibid., v. 281-2.

10 Compare R. A. Griffiths, 'Duke Richard of York's Intentions in 1450', *Journal of Medieval History*, i (1976), 203-4.

11 Armstrong, 'St Albans', 63.

Leicester.<sup>11</sup> In this context, the judgement of the London chroniclers that the king fled westwards is not as inappropriate as Armstrong thought.<sup>12</sup> If appropriately directed, his route could also have removed any risk of direct contact or conflict with the Yorkists.

Ostensibly the second letter was despatched because the first letter might not have reached the king. What, then, was the point of the second letter? If the Yorkist lords expected the king to be at London/Westminster, it was not unreasonable that the first letter should have missed him as he proceeded towards St Albans. Why should they care? We may additionally deduce that the second letter was despatched because no reply was received to the first. What was there in that first letter that required so urgent a response? The most obvious answer is what was stressed in the second letter: the Yorkist lords had received no acknowledgement of their loyalty as a preliminary to their declared intention to meet with the king. This is what they wanted. In the time that they allowed, this was all that was feasible. If they had been accepted as loyal and admitted to audience by the king, no 'inconvenience' would have resulted. But no reasonable consideration or discussion could have been fitted into such a deadline. Their time-scale allowed for nothing other than immediate acceptance of their demands. King Henry never did accept and repute them as loyal before the battle: no source says that he did.

The later *Parliamentary Pardon* reports that the first letter was forwarded by the archbishop to the king and was handed by John Say to Master Thomas Manning at 10 a.m. on 21 May and was then relayed to the duke of Somerset, Thomas Thorpe, and William Joseph. It reports that the second letter was passed by York's confessor William Williflete to the earl of Devon at 2 a.m. on the day of the battle itself.<sup>13</sup> It seems that not more than twelve hours can have passed between the delivery of the first letter and the despatch of the second. This is a very short period to allow for receipt, consideration, reply, and transmission back to the lords. The period may have been further curtailed by the king's departure from London, which meant that the two parties were converging. Hence the urgency. If the second letter was delivered at 2 a.m. and the king had travelled from Watford to St Albans by 7 a.m. on 22 May, it is not perhaps surprising that he had no opportunity to see or read the letters. The *Parliamentary Pardon* says that both letters were concealed from the king by Somerset, Thorpe and Joseph. Consequently, so the Yorkists claimed, the battle was based on a misunderstanding, for the king was unaware of the protestations of loyalty and non-violence expressed in their letters by the Yorkist peers. Hence Somerset was allowed to attack them!<sup>14</sup>

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12 Ibid. 25n.

13 *RP*, v. 281-2.

14 Ibid. v. 282.

Thus far this discussion has assumed that the letters are what they purport to be and that the account in the *Parliamentary Pardon* is reliable. These presumptions are doubtful. It is striking first of all that neither letter refers to any earlier correspondence, yet earlier correspondence there must surely have been. King Henry summoned military support to Coventry on 18 May and on 19 May ordered the chancellor to send letters to the Yorkist lords under the great seal ordering them to disband on pain of forfeiture.<sup>15</sup> Letters under the great seal were the most authoritative that the king could send. These letters were surely the last resort, after earlier privy seal and/or council letters had been ignored. Unfortunately the privy seal and council records fail us at this point. Surely it was the threatening advance of the Yorkist lords that had caused the king to put off his departure from London to the day when the Leicester council was actually due to open? Their explanation why they needed such numbers was their response to the king's commands to York to restrict his company to 200 and to the earls to limit theirs to 160 each. It compares with similarly specious excuses on previous and subsequent occasions. Secondly, as Armstrong pointed out, it was disingenuous of the Yorkist lords to claim that the Leicester council was concerned with the surety of the king against others and to offer their own protection. Thirdly, Armstrong thought that the *Parliamentary Pardons's* account of the concealment of both letters strained credibility, though he was willing to accept that they were delivered at the times and by the individuals that it claimed. And fourthly, York made no attempt to secure an audience with the king to declare his allegiance on 22 May. His stance was much more aggressive.

Were the letters authentic at all? They survive in their most complete form in the *Parliamentary Pardon*. Were they concocted for that purpose? It seems unlikely, both because the recipient — Archbishop Bourchier — and the intermediaries, Say, Manning and Devon, were presumably prepared to testify to their authenticity; also because they are not as innocent as complete fabrications could have been made; and because they evidently did exist before the battle. The fullest version is that contained in the *Parliamentary Pardon*, the letter of 20 May preceding that of 21 May, and both being embedded in narrative.<sup>16</sup> There are at least two other contemporary versions. In both cases the two letters were written on the same sheet of paper without headings or introductions. This suggests that neither is derived from the *Parliamentary Pardon*, which contains explanatory material that makes sense of them.

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15 Armstrong, 'St Albans', 17-19.

16 *RP*, v. 281-2.

The second version handed to John Paston I consisted of, first, the covering letter (21 May), which survives, followed by, second, the original letter (20 May), which has since been torn off and lost. The letters are thus in reverse order to those in the *Parliamentary Pardon*. They correspond to that of 21 May, of covering letter and enclosure, and ceased to be relevant after 22 May, the day of the battle. This version is therefore important evidence for the authenticity of the letters. The Paston version seems most likely to be a contemporary copy distributed at that time. The surviving letter of 21 May is already incomplete, omitting the address, date, and writers.<sup>17</sup> It thus resembles other contemporary propaganda bills that are also unattributable, ignore other correspondence, and depend for effect either on oral explanation or on the contents themselves for topicality. There was no need of explanation because recipients knew what they were and how they were significant.<sup>18</sup>

The third version consists of the letter of 20 May followed without explanation by that of 21 May.<sup>19</sup> It thus corresponds in order to that of the *Parliamentary Pardon*; however the text of the first letter is paragraphed somewhat differently. Clearly this version must be of 21 May or later. The arrangement of the letters in order suggests a similar purpose to the *Parliamentary Pardon*: to demonstrate the pacific and innocent intentions of the Yorkist lords between late May and 9 July, when parliament opened.

As we have seen, the letters do have a comprehensible contemporary context. Their message was one of reassurance. However, this message was surely untrue, for the intention in writing to the king was to reassure him, his council, and those who heard the proclamations of the Yorkist lords' non-military intentions and to disarm opposition, whilst actually seeking to coerce compliance with their wishes and resorting to force if necessary. The Yorkists did not rebel merely to secure recognition as loyal subjects! The survival of the version 'handed-over to John Paston' suggests another function: that it was one of many distributed broadcast. Not all towns etc. were circulated as in 1452 — there was not enough time between 21 May and the battle next day. These letters may however have been used to dissuade loyal lords from intervening and, even more significantly perhaps, to persuade York's own men that they were not engaged in treason.

To demonstrate that the letters in the *Parliamentary Pardon* are authentic is not to accept that they were never delivered to the king or council, nor that they arrived unaccompanied by other messages, nor to accept they arrived in a vacuum. It is striking that after

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17 *Paston Letters*, iii. 23-4.

18 For a parallel, see the expurgated correspondence in Griffiths, 'York's Intentions', 203-4.

19 British Library, Add. MS 11301.



leaving London the king replaced the duke of Somerset as constable by the duke of Buckingham and that Buckingham gave assurances to York before the battle that he was not protecting Somerset.<sup>20</sup> These two actions strongly suggest that the king and Buckingham knew that York wished primarily to strike at Somerset. Whilst possibly common knowledge, that insight could not be obtained from the published letters of 20/21 May. It implies some other source: some other communication between York and the court.

### III

The *Fastolf Relation* records the negotiations in the morning before the battle between Richard, duke of York and the king's representatives, in particular Humphrey, duke of Buckingham. It is so well-informed that the author was probably an officer of arms involved with Mowbray herald in the discussions from York's side. Since the *Fastolf Relation* makes no reference to the result of the battle, it was surely written that same day, whilst the battle was going on.<sup>21</sup> It was not therefore influenced by Yorkist propaganda after the battle. It reports that York told the king's representatives that he had come 'pour avoir expedicion de mes demandes et requestes' and to do loyal service to the king. These 'petitions demandes et requestes' are later elaborated as those 'que autresfoix il lui avoit envoyees par monseigneur de Faucomberge et autres en sa compagnie'.<sup>22</sup>

Latching on to the 'autresfoix', Armstrong deduced that these articles had been presented some considerable time before and suggested that they were the articles that York presented to the king in 1452 at the Dartford fiasco. The main difficulty he encountered here was that Fauconberg was handed over as a hostage in 1449 and had probably not been ransomed by the time of the Dartford episode.<sup>23</sup> There are other objections, however. The Dartford articles were essentially the same as the appeal of treason made by the duke of Norfolk against Somerset, which Henry VI had effectively rejected by referring the differences of York and Somerset to arbitration on 4 March 1455.<sup>24</sup> It may be, however, that York did not accept this decision. More seriously, these 'petitions' had been sent via Lord Fauconberg, who was actually in the royal army from London to St Albans and is not known to have been involved before this date. The *Fastolf Relation* reveals additionally, on

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20 Armstrong, 'St Albans', 23n, 29, 63.

21 Ibid. 4.

22 Ibid. 66. Literally, of course, 'autresfoix' means on *several* other occasions.

23 Ibid. 10.

24 Ibid. 8.

Buckingham's trustworthy authority, that the king had not yet seen them, so they cannot have been the Dartford articles; that Buckingham was aware of this; that he had them to hand and was able to show them to the king; and that the king made no reply — or, more probably, reserved his reply.<sup>25</sup> These points fit a bill that had been made very recently, in the last few days, shortly before or after the king's departure from London, which Buckingham had concealed from the king or had not yet shown him.

It is possible of course that these 'petitions' were the letters of 20/21 May 1455. These letters were recent and, according to the *Parliamentary Pardon*, were concealed from the king, not by Fauconberg and Buckingham, but by Somerset, Thorpe and Joseph. It is not obvious however why these scapegoats should have concealed these particular letters, especially the second letter, when threatened with a battle, nor why Henry VI should have been unwilling to respond to them. They do not take long to assimilate and are ostensibly bland. They seem too insubstantial to deserve the *Fastolf Relation's* elaborate description of them. Neither contains the demand for action against the enemies of the Yorkist lords that is mentioned in the *Stow Relation*.<sup>26</sup> It seems, therefore, that these letters cannot be what the *Fastolf Relation* meant.

The letters of 20/21 May make no reference to any such 'petitions', which they would surely have done had these been issued earlier. York was demanding the 'expedition' of the king's response soon after 7 a.m. on 22 May when the king had received his second letter only at 2 a.m. that day. The two likeliest occasions for these articles to be submitted are with the first and second letters. Since the first was sent not to the king, but to the archbishop, the absence of any reference in this first letter to the articles does not preclude the articles from being submitted simultaneously to Fauconberg. That they had indeed been received could explain both why Buckingham replaced Somerset and why Buckingham denied that he was protecting Somerset. Unfortunately, however, this implies that the king had seen the articles, which Lancastrian sources make clear that he had not. A more promising moment for such articles to be delivered is when Williflete delivered the second letter. This also made no reference to any accompanying items. However Thomas Gascoigne, a well-informed immediate contemporary, stated that Williflete demanded that Somerset be handed over to two knights for imprisonment pending trial.<sup>27</sup> The *Stow Relation*, as we have seen, mentions Yorkist demands for the hand-over of enemies, which the *Fastolf Relation*

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25 *Ibid.* 67.

26 *Paston Letters*, iii. 25.

27 Thomas Gascoigne, *Loci e Libro Veritatum*, ed. J. E. T. Rogers (Oxford, 1881), 203; see also *Registrum Abbatiae Johannis Whetehamstede*, ed. H. T. Riley (Rolls Series, 2 vols., 1872-3), i. 167.

makes clear was not actually requested during negotiations. It did not need to be, if it was contained in the 'petitions'. This chronology is also compatible with the assurance that the royal party was defending the king and not any other person.<sup>28</sup> Buckingham had read the 'petitions', but the king had not.

The Yorkist lords intended to secure the king's acknowledgement of their loyalty, as in 1450<sup>29</sup> and again in 1459-60, prior to presenting articles (*petitions*) that included the removal and punishment of their enemies. Owing to Somerset's decision to leave London, the two stages became entangled, the articles being delivered with the second letter. It was these articles that were the nub of discussions on 22 May. York wanted a response without delay and attacked when no response was forthcoming. The king's failure to reply was not because he was numb and vague or that he was backing Buckingham in defence of Somerset, as stated by Armstrong, but that he 'n'estoit pas advise pour leure donner aucune response'.<sup>30</sup> He had only just seen the articles and needed more time and advice before replying. He reserved his reply. York would not have acquiesced in refusal. And it also appears that Henry was unwilling to repute the Yorkist lords as loyal liegemen. Henry VI was capable of an unworldly resistance to pressure.

#### IV

The *Stow Relation* is the official Yorkist account of the battle. It survives in two closely related versions, as a small booklet among the Stonor papers and as a copy in *John Vale's Book*,<sup>31</sup> and was evidently circulated to promote the Yorkist point of view. The version printed by Stow is Vale's variant augmented with details, notably casualties, from elsewhere. Whilst the two main variants are very similar and the differences are small,<sup>32</sup> it seems that the Stonor variant precedes in date that of Vale. Vale contains more factual material, notably in the list of casualties; it is somewhat more corrupt than Stonor; it reveals that Lord Sudeley was also wounded; and it makes certain other alterations. Vale alone states that the vanquished surrendered their armour 'at their owne requeste ... for salvacion

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28 Armstrong, 'St Albans', 63.

29 Griffiths, 'York's Intentions', 203.

30 Armstrong, 'St Albans', 67. This reminds one of the formula 'Le Roy s'avisera' applied to parliamentary bills, though actually denoting their rejection.

31 PRO, C 47/37/4, printed in *Paston Letters*, iii. 25-9; Kekewich, *John Vale's Book*, 190-3.

32 As itemised by J. L. Watts in Kekewich, *John Vale's Book*, 193.

of their lyves'; that the Yorkist Lords were loyal, 'whiche was wele sene at that tyme that they were noon other'; and it omits the charge of cowardice against the earl of Wiltshire, whom the Yorkists wished to pacify. Vale organises the material under headings, as letters rather than direct speech: it was well-known that Henry made no oral reply. It omits the *Deo gratias* that ends Stonor and which indicates a thankful relief most appropriate for the immediate aftermath to the fighting. Armstrong suggested that the *Stow Relation* was written very early. The Stonor variant could have been written as early as Saturday 24 May — the day after the 'morwe' when they arrived in London; Vale is later, but very little later, certainly not after the following week.

The *Stow Relation* does not refer to either the letters of 20/21 May or the 'petitions'. York does not feature either seeking an audience with the king or as seeking a reply to his articles. No antecedents or explanations are mentioned. The story begins with the king's departure from Watford to St Albans. The preliminaries are in three parts: York's protestations of loyalty and demand for the surrender of those who deserved death, initially in direct speech (Stonor), then in paraphrase (Vale); the king's reply threatening them with the penalty of traitors if they did not disband, initially in words (Stonor), then in paraphrase (Vale); and York's speech to his men in which he says that they must fight to escape a shameful death as traitors. Since none of this features in the other relations, probably none of it is true. There then follows the account of the battle - the best narrative we have, but which is nevertheless cursory and selectively edited. The *Stow Relation* makes no reference to any Yorkists other than the three principal lords, perhaps to protect them; it does not indicate when they employed the archery and ordnance, the use of which somewhat belies the carefully disciplined and targeted impression that it seeks to convey; it may not even be correct in location, since it describes the king's standard as pitched in Holywell Street, south of the market, whereas the archdeacon's register locates the casualties to the north, in St Peter's ward;<sup>33</sup> and it tells us little of the fate of the vanquished, who may have escaped eastwards where, so far as we know, no Yorkist troops were deployed. It does list the casualties, probably of both sides.<sup>34</sup> It does not state how seriously the royal party fought: a significant topic, since both Devon and Fauconberg immediately associated themselves with the victors. There is a lengthy description of the lords' submission to the king, his acknowledgement that they were his loyal subjects, their celebrations in London, and plans for a parliament.

That the *Stow Relation* departs so markedly from York's earlier stance and explains events somewhat uneasily in terms of the king's rejection of his loyal promises is surely because the battle superseded everything. Since they had fought the king, the Yorkist lords

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33 Armstrong, 'St Albans', 69.

34 *Paston Letters*, iii. 28.

needed to show that they were justified, on somewhat specious grounds. Their 'petitions' did not constitute such grounds and were outdated by Somerset's death. His arrest and trial were no longer an objective. The Yorkist lords could not plead that the 'petitions' or letters had been concealed from the king by Buckingham, since they wanted a rapprochement with Buckingham. The emphasis even by the *Stow Relation* had moved on from disagreements and divisive issues — no longer significant with Somerset dead — to reconciliation. Resistance was fended off by the promise of parliament, which offered opportunities both for the lords to be exculpated and for their hold on power to be reinforced. Already they were more concerned for reconciliation with the vanquished than to celebrate their triumph.

## V

This posture could not last very long and did not. In spite of prohibitions on discussion, inevitably more information became available. Evidently there was also a change of plan. Somehow the *Stow Relation* no longer fulfilled Yorkist requirements. The shift is signalled by the *Phillipps Relation*, which Armstrong dated not later than 27 May. This commences thus:

The solecytouriz and causerys of the feld takyng at Seynt Albony's, ther namys shewyn her aftyr:

The Lord Clyfford  
 Rauff Percy  
 Thorpe  
 Tresham and Josep<sup>35</sup>

As this anticipates the line taken in the *Parliamentary Pardon*, it represents the first inkling of a change in the Yorkist plan. The justification in the *Stow Relation* carried little legal weight and conceded that the lords had fought the king knowingly. What, however, if the king had been deceived, because their loyalty had been concealed from him, and his party were thus transformed into the aggressors? Current political considerations restricted the list of possible scapegoats. Fauconberg, now a Yorkist adherent, could not be presented as responsible for the concealment; nor could Buckingham, with whom they had come to terms, nor Wiltshire with whom they hoped to be reconciled; nor was the new earl of

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35 Ibid. iii. 29.

Northumberland, son of the old, perhaps for the same reasons. But others could be. The choice of names includes two later omitted — the late Lord Clifford and Sir Ralph Percy — surely suggested by the Nevilles as prime movers in the Percy-Neville feud.<sup>36</sup> Clifford and Percy were to be dropped — we may guess that the Yorkist lords could not afford to make enemies unnecessarily of the new earl of Northumberland and the new Lord Clifford. The letters of 20/21 May, as we have seen, were circulated to demonstrate their peaceful intentions.

By the opening of parliament, the new case had been completed and incorporated in the *Parliamentary Pardon*. This time there was no reference to the 'petitions', to the request to hand-over those deserving of death, to the king's threat of the penalties of treason, or to the Yorkists' treasonable assault on a king with his banners displayed. Instead the fault was heaped on Somerset, Thorpe and Joseph, who deceived the king, concealed the truth of York's loyalty, withheld the two letters of 20/21 May, and caused the battle. The letters were reproduced in full with details of delivery. Supposedly they demonstrated the innocence and loyalty of the Yorkist lords.<sup>37</sup> Though duly passed, 'many a man groged ful sore'.<sup>38</sup> Even if it did not satisfy all the House of Commons at the time, the *Parliamentary Pardon* came to convince almost all the chroniclers.

## VI

The standard technique for historians faced with multiple contradictory versions of the same event is to give priority to the earliest sources, to the strictly contemporary accounts. In this case there are at least six such accounts written within a week and a seventh soon after. Even within such a short space of time, far less than what medievalists characteristically have to work with, there were appreciable changes in the story and its presentation that warn us even more strongly how much is normally missing. If that standard technique proves inconclusive, the next approach to employ is the identification of the common core that all the sources share, the reconciliation of the apparent differences, and the imposition of a precise chronological framework on the narratives with the help of contemporary records. John Armstrong performed all these tasks admirably.

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36 See R. A. Griffiths, 'Local Rivalries and National Politics: The Percies, the Nevilles, and the Duke of Exeter 1452-5', *Speculum*, xliii (1968), 589-632.

37 *RP*, v. 280-2.

38 *Paston Letters*, v. 44.

This paper has adopted a rather different approach. It has re-examined those documents emanating directly from the Yorkists, both individually in turn and as a group. In the process, it has demonstrated that they are not to be seen as representing a single tradition, but as at least three different versions that incorporate at least two changes of mind. Initially, it seems, York sought as in 1450 to secure recognition of his loyalty as a preliminary to coercive petitioning in London that was designed certainly to destroy his rival the duke of Somerset, probably others, and perhaps to secure changes in the government and its policies. Secondly, when that failed and the battle resulted, the Yorkists abandoned their articles and argued instead that they had fought because they had been unjustly threatened with attainder as traitors. This had also been York's unfounded claim in 1450; he was to claim that his enemies aspired to his forfeited possessions in 1459-60. Since that stance proved unsatisfactory, it was quickly changed to one in which the blame was placed on Somerset, Thorpe and Joseph, who were charged with estranging the king, concealing the letters, and thus causing the battle. The deaths in battle became *casual* or accidental: a defence repeated in 1459.

Each of these versions was intended for public consumption. None of them is strictly true: the first because it sought to mislead and disarm potential opposition and to reassure supporters; the second because it sought to serve the victors' objective of reconciliation by omitting the original divisive issues; and the third by placing all the blame on three scapegoats and thus clearing the Yorkists. None is strictly accurate or designed to tell the objective truth; none can be accepted at face value.

It is striking that the Yorkists felt the need to explain themselves repeatedly and to adapt their story line as they went. Public opinion needed to be influenced and, when the results were not satisfactory, the message had to be reshaped. There was a demand for news among the nobility, gentry, and the citizens of London, who solicited and acquired copies of the relations, and who incorporated them in their chronicles. The *Parliamentary Pardon* was the final version. It set out the most favourable version of events in the most authoritative venue; so many powerful and influential people encountered it that, perhaps, no further changes were possible. The results of the battle meant that the Yorkists had no need to fight or assert the issues that brought them to battle: their enemies were killed, they themselves were in command, and committees for reform were established as one of the first actions of the new parliament. The contentious, factious, real issues could be dropped. All the Yorkist relations of events, even the earliest, are concerned to conceal the real cause of conflict, the real initiators, and the real results. The *Parliamentary Pardon* drew a veil over the past as the victors initiated what they hoped was a new beginning. Reconciliation was their message. That it was not the inclination of their opponents and enemies we can deduce only from their subsequent conduct.

One recurrent theme in the Yorkist propaganda of the 1450s is concealment. Henry VI was not told or shown everything and was not aware of what was being done in his

name. In 1455, despite Yorkist claims to the contrary, there is no convincing evidence that King Henry did not see the two letters of 20/21 May. What was at issue and what he may not initially have seen were York's articles, probably delivered during the night before the battle from Williflete by Fauconberg. What does seem conclusive and what does bear out the account in the *Stow Relation*, is that on this occasion the king declined to accept the Yorkist earls as true liegemen. In that respect York was treated differently compared with 1450 and 1452. York's propaganda that the king was ignorant and thus not really opposed to him, therefore, was designed to conceal the crucially important point that Henry had effectively ruled against him. It was the battle that rehabilitated York. The same technique was to be employed in 1459-60 when the king formally condemned Yorkist actions and Yorkist propaganda claimed — and had to be denied, unavailingly — that he had not given his consent to their proscription.

With the exception of *Giles's Chronicle*, Armstrong found all the sources to be pro-Yorkist. One factor that he identified was the popularity of the Yorkists in London.<sup>39</sup> Another reason is that the Yorkists disseminated their own versions — the letters, the *Stow Relation*, and then the *Parliamentary Pardon*. These are indeed the base accounts for modern historians. With the exception of the *Fastolf Relation*, all the strictly contemporary accounts derive from the Yorkist version exemplified by the *Stow Relation*; this and the *Parliamentary Pardon* are behind the chronicle accounts. Even Abbot Whetehamstede of St Albans seems to have drawn his interpretation, not from his own eyewitness experience, but from the *Parliamentary Pardon*.<sup>40</sup> There was no lasting legacy of the reservations and hostility to the *Parliamentary Pardon* of members of parliament. A third, complementary reason, is that the Lancastrians issued no propaganda, either before or after, or at least none has survived. Taken by surprise, the Lancastrians had no time to compose anything beforehand, such as a proclamation asserting their rightness and the treason of the Yorkists. Immediately afterwards, defeated and ousted, they lacked a cause, a leader, and anyone to write for them. Whilst the Yorkists were obliged to atone for the deaths of the Lancastrian lords at the loveday of St Paul's in 1458 and the battle — 'the execrabil and moost detestible dede by them doon at Seint Albones' — was included in their incorrigible offences in 1459,<sup>41</sup> on neither occasion was an alternative Lancastrian account constructed or circulated to counter the Yorkist narrative that was current. Throughout the period, from 1450-1460, the Yorkists disseminated influential propaganda and disinformation; the Lancastrians apparently distributed none. The initiative lay with the Yorkists who, coincidentally, won.

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39 Armstrong, 'St Albans', 6.

40 *Registrum Whetehamstede*, i. 164-78, 183-6.

41 *RP*, v. 347.



It is still difficult even in this splendidly documented case to establish how well-targeted Yorkist propaganda was and how successfully it shaped public opinion. Much light has however been shed on the intentions and techniques of the propagandists: how they hoped to influence their target audience, what message they sought to propagate, and how sensitive they were to the consequences that they perceived. Behind a facade of principle and long-term objectives they demonstrated a pragmatic flexibility and an adaptability to short-term considerations and events. The *Parliamentary Pardon*, for so many years the official version of events, was actually not concerned with historical truth; it looked forward, to a new start and future politics, and sought to close down the politics of the past.

Of course, this is a supremely well-documented episode. The approach adopted here cannot be applied in every case. But there are some other events for which it is applicable, in 1450 and 1459-60 for instance. Whilst indisputably narrow in themselves, such examples offer a route to firmer generalisation about the intentions of such publicity and indirectly to an improved understanding of the target audience, of public opinion, its importance and its manipulation. If we are to measure and evaluate the development of public opinion and its manipulation for political ends, we need to make the most of the cases that are best documented.