

## TACITUS' AGRICOLA AND LESSONS FOR TODAY

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The exercise of power, even the most well-meaning and just, always generates some level of dissatisfaction and opposition. It is because the realm of politics is a realm of constant competition that in many cases erupts in violence. Not surprisingly, therefore, insurgencies, rebellions, and fragile political control are a recurrent reality in history, and much can be learned from past, even ancient, examples. One such rich source of knowledge is the Roman historian Tacitus, and in particular his short eulogy of his father in law, Agricola.

This gem of historical literature can be read in many ways, and one of them is to treat it as a manual of counterinsurgency. Agricola was a Roman general who spent the bulk of his military and political career at the frontier of imperial power in Britain. There, over the course of several years (77-85 AD), he faced a rebellious local population. His response was a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign accompanied by a northward extension of Roman influence.

Agricola's strategy was based on four principles, easy to understand but difficult to implement, and with few guarantees of success.

*First*, "little was accomplished by force if injustice followed."<sup>1</sup> A key source of discontent was the capriciousness of the existing Roman rule. People prefer a known burden, even if large, rather than constantly and randomly changing impositions. But Roman administrators, blinded by their superior military power and a tactical victory over a rebellious leader, behaved arbitrarily. The resulting situation was "more intolerable than the tribute itself" because the latter was at least expected while the avarice of individual administrators was limited only by their ability to wield power. Agricola's first step was therefore to instill predictability to Roman administration by bringing discipline and order to his own men. The result was to decrease the level of uncertainty experienced by the conquered population. Uncertainty of rule is the worst enemy of stable and enduring political control.

*Second*, violence is necessary but should be brief, quick, and devastating. Machiavelli similarly argued in the *Discourses* that it is preferable to fight wars that are "*corte e grosse*" (brief and massive). The main purpose is to impress the enemy by establishing a reputation for military superiority that then can be used in future interactions. The shorter the application of violence, the stronger the reputation and thus the more effective the political control. This is particularly important on the frontier of imperial power where time was not on the side of Roman forces, the counterinsurgents. The sheer distance of the frontier from Rome made a large-scale protracted military commitment unfeasible. Even more, the perception of weakness would have generated further rebellions, sapping

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<sup>1</sup> Agricola, 63.

Roman power. A reputation for military success was preferable to the actual use of power. When given the opportunity, Agricola made sure the use of Roman force was massive and definitive. After the last major battle at Mons Graupius, “everywhere was dismal silence, lonely hills, houses smoking to heaven... [and Agricola’s] scouts met no one.”<sup>2</sup>

*Third*, immediately following a military victory, Agricola “paraded before [the defeated] the attractions of peace.”<sup>3</sup> Violence is necessary but has limits in what it can achieve. In the constant quest to diminish the need for violence, he engaged in what we now call state-building: his policy was to “assist communities, to erect temples, market-places, houses: he praised the energetic, rebuked the indolent, and the rivalry for his compliments took the place of coercion.”<sup>4</sup> The purpose was both to show to the local population the benefits of not rebelling and to replace the source of local authority by concentrating it on the Roman governor.

Finally, *fourth*, Agricola began a slow process of assimilation. He educated the sons of local chieftains “in a liberal education,” bringing Latin and the toga, then the “the promenade, the bath, the well-appointed dinner table.” The British called it culture, but it was a “factor of their slavery.”<sup>5</sup> The idea behind this strategy was that the impulse to oppose Roman power would weaken as the locals became increasingly more similar to their conquerors. If only Britain could be made into Rome’s image, rebellions would cease. It was a policy that was risky in large measure because it was difficult to measure the level of assimilation of the targeted tribes. Agricola himself must have been very aware of this as he had to deal with a revolt of the Usipi, a tribal group from Germany, who were with the Romans in Britain. “After murdering their centurions and such soldiers as had been distributed among their companies to instill discipline, and who passed as models and instructors,” the Usipi commandeered some ships and sailed around Britain, bringing destruction with them.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, the Roman attempt to train and befriend frontier tribal forces was in this case a failure, ending in an ancient example of “green-on-blue” attack.

To sum up, Agricola’s counterinsurgency is conceptually simple: build a reputation for strength but also for self-restraint and order, defeat the enemy but make peace attractive, keep military supremacy but also assimilate the conquered population. Virgil summed it up brilliantly: *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* (Virgil, Aeneid, VI, 853). Military victory is only a prelude for a longer and more difficult series of actions. It allows the employment of other tools, from state-building to education, to achieve stable and enduring control. In the end, however, there is no guarantee that it will succeed. Britain after all remained a partially stable frontier province, too distant from Rome to warrant continuous expenditure of attention and resources.

It is difficult to implement these counterinsurgency principles because they require an individual who is both a martial and a political leader, who can move between the battlefield and the forum with equal ease. But even when such leaders appear, as in the case of Agricola, another source of difficulty remains, namely the cold fact that counterinsurgency is still the application of power, that is, of forcing others to do things that they do not want to do. As such, it is a competition, which may be waged with tools that appear pleasant (“soft,” “smart”, or in Agricola’s time, “the promenade, the bath, the well-appointed dinner table”) but that in the end need to make the opponent realize the futility of his struggle. The Romans, including Agricola, for the most part were aware that such competition was never ending, and rebellions or insurgencies were always brewing. Counterinsurgency was not a momentary approach to solve once and for all a problem, but a constant posture aimed at managing a perennial condition. Its weakest point, therefore, was the willingness or the resolve of the Romans, the counterinsurgents, to engage in a prolonged, generational and perhaps even longer, contest of wills.

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<sup>2</sup> Agricola, 97.

<sup>3</sup> Agricola, 67.

<sup>4</sup> Agricola, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Agricola, 67.

<sup>6</sup> Agricola, 77.