

Imperial Rule in Tacitus' *Agricola* and Martin Luther King Jr's *Beyond Vietnam*

Madison Law-Bonvie

The writings of Tacitus range from Roman history to Roman politics. Through Tacitus' historical works, we get a glimpse of his political views concerning the Roman Empire during the tyrannical reign of Domitian between 81-96 CE. In tandem, Martin Luther King Jr. was an activist and a civil rights leader in the United States of America during the Vietnam War in the middle of the 20th Century. He is prominently figured in addressing the impoverished state of Americans, and the failure of the American government to protect its own citizens due to its military preoccupation in other nations. In comparing the political opinions of both Tacitus and King, there are striking similarities and differences concerning their views of Imperialism, or conquest by means of military might. In Tacitus' *Agricola*, the speeches of his characters, the Britons and Calgacus, express and incite opposition against the oppressive Roman Empire. In *Beyond Vietnam*, Martin Luther King calls the American government to cease waging an unjust war against not only the Vietnamese, but in consequence also against the poor citizens of America. The writings of Tacitus and Martin Luther King reveal that they disagree with the violent and subversive actions of their respective governments. However, while Martin Luther King argues against every aspect of American military action in Vietnam, Tacitus himself is ambiguous whether he is favor of Rome's expansion, though his characters clearly demonstrate the needless cruelty of the Roman Empire.

In the *Agricola*, the speech of the conquered Britons of Caledonia reveal the initial ruminations of negative opinion and attitude towards the Roman Empire. Speaking for themselves as a subdued people, they demonstrate that the Romans have no intentions except to terrorize them:

"All we get by patience . . . is that heavier demands are exacted from us, as from men who will readily submit. A single king once ruled us; now two are set over us; a Roman military commander to tyrannise over our lives, a Roman governor to tyrannise over our property."¹

1. Tacitus, *Life of Agricola* (selections) Translated by A.J. Church and W.J. Bor-

In their discontent, they begin to devise a plan to resist the Roman Empire: "We have already taken the hardest step; we are deliberating. And indeed, in all such designs, to dare is less perilous than to be detected."²

This deliberation of resistance escalates in Calgacus' speech, where he, "clamouring for battle,"³ endeavors to excite the people of Caledonia to resist the Roman Empire. He appeals to the natural order of freedom that the Britons had before the Roman occupation: "To all of us slavery is a thing unknown . . . [for] Nature has willed that every man's children and kindred should be his dearest objects. Yet these are torn from us by conscriptions to be slaves elsewhere."⁴ There is no resistance from this slavery imposed upon the Britons, "whose oppression escape is vainly sought by obedience and submission."⁵ Furthermore, not only is obedience not a solution to ease their oppression, there is in fact no limit of desire that will satisfy the expanding Empire:

Robbers of the world, having by their universal plunder exhausted the land, they rifle the deep. If the enemy be rich, they are rapacious; if he be poor, they lust for dominion; neither the east nor the west has been able to satisfy them.

By identifying the endless and inescapable oppression of the Empire, the Britons are moved to fight not simply against other men, but against that which will unendingly abuse and consume the land and people: "Our goods and fortunes they collect for their tribute, our harvests for their granaries. Our very hands and bodies, under the lash and in the midst of insult, are worn down by the toil of clearing forests and morasses."⁶ For the sake of their livelihood, they must resist.

These speeches from Tacitus reveal striking similarities with that of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech, *Beyond Vietnam*. While the speeches in *Agricola* are presented by characters who are suffering oppression and advocating for military resistance, King's speech derives from his own perspective as a citizen of a government which also demonstrates a similar 'Roman' oppression in another nation. In America's attempt to route Communism within Vietnam,

dribb, with modernisation by J. Mitchell, In-class handout 2016, 15.

2. *Ibid.*, 15.

3. *Ibid.*, 29.

4. *Ibid.*, 30, 31.

5. *Ibid.*, 30.

6. *Ibid.*, 31.

the military measures used are precisely that which enslaves and kills the Vietnamese: “They move sadly and apathetically as we herd them off the land of their fathers into concentration camps where minimal social needs are rarely met. They know they must move or be destroyed by our bombs.”⁷ The people of Vietnam have lost their own “natural” state of freedom, being relocated from their ancestral lands and subjected to containment and slavish conditions. But perhaps more importantly, King recognizes the alarming reality which emerges by continuing this kind of war, since it will facilitate the further ‘expansion’ of America’s military conquest into China:

If we continue, there will be no doubt in my mind and in the mind of the world that we have no honorable intentions in Vietnam. It will become clear that our minimal expectation is to occupy it as an American colony and men will not refrain from thinking that our maximum hope is to goad China into a war so that we may bomb her nuclear installations.⁸

This is not unlike Calgacus’ evaluation of the Roman Empire. The endless cycle of desire and expansion will ‘colonize’ Vietnam and subject it directly to American policy, which in turn will spur this cycle to engage in military conquest of the surrounding nations. From this insider’s perspective, King urges the American government to cease its operation in Vietnam and take measures to remove its presence.⁹ For, King perceives that America’s attempt to establish international peace makes it impossible for there to be peace and protection for its vulnerable citizens within its own borders:

It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, -- both black and white -- through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube.¹⁰

Unlike the speeches in *Agricola*, King advocates international and

7. Martin Luther King, *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*, speech 1967, In-handout 2016, 23.

8. *Ibid.*, 37.

9. *Ibid.*, 39.

10. *Ibid.*, 9.

civic peace through the personal remission of America's pride by admitting that it has erred:

"The world now demands a maturity of America that we may not be able to achieve. It demands that we admit that we have been wrong from the beginning of our adventure in Vietnam, that we have been detrimental to the life of the Vietnamese people."¹¹

King is urging the people to acknowledge the fact that, since the military and the government are not taking steps to stop the war, the American people must "take the initiative in bringing a halt to this tragic war."¹² The speakers in all three speeches are indeed against the actions of their government, however the Britons and Calgacus desire to fight against their government as a conquered people against their oppressors, whereas Martin Luther King is striving to achieve the cessation of America's conquest in Vietnam by means of the humility of America.

These notions expressed in *Beyond Vietnam* share a similar criticism of military conquest with the characters in *Agricola*, despite their respective place as subdued and citizen of an "empire," but more can be said about how King's ideas are more or less reflective of Tacitus himself. This necessary separation between Tacitus and his writing is noted by Sir Ronald Syme "The exegesis is bound up with hazards. . . [such as] the whole relation between the writer and his material. History is a dramatic narration. The author's presentation is coloured by the theme, the events, and the characters."¹³ Living under the tyranny of Domitian, Syme argues that Tacitus has had to subdue his criticism within the elements of historical narrative:

The dramatic presentation of men and events discloses the author's devise and preoccupations, not his innermost sentiments. The speeches, though often a clue by their selection and emphasis, cannot safely be invoked to register his own opinions.¹⁴

So, Just as Martin Luther King's speech was an attack on the American government's role in Vietnam, Tacitus' writing "is a laudation to Agricola and an attack on Domitian."¹⁵ In the forefront of his writing, Tacitus criticizes the Romans for the violent and unjust treatment of the Britons:

11. *Ibid.*, 38.

12. *Ibid.*, 39.

13. Ronald Syme, *Ten Studies in Tacitus* 10, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, 130.

14. *Ibid.*, 131.

15. *Ibid.*

"The author interpolates violent language to the detriment of unnamed persons, those who admire that which is wrong. . . He condemns perilous conduct and ostentatious deaths with no benefit to the commonwealth . . . alluding thus to the victims of the Domitianic tyranny."¹⁶

Thus, one must discern the views of Tacitus in tandem with his more obscure meanings hidden within his writing.

However would seem that, even outside the speeches of characters, we see clearly in *Agricola* that Tacitus shares similar ideas in finding Rome culpable for the slavish and rebellious condition of the Britons. He argues that "The Britons themselves bear cheerfully the conscription, the taxes, and the other burdens imposed on them by the Empire, as long as there is no oppression."¹⁷ Following this statement, Tacitus cites the history of Roman attempts to strike "terror" and "gain possession" of Briton, indicating for future rulers that Briton was a nation to subdue.¹⁸ As well, once *Agricola* defeats the Rebellion of Boudicea and becomes governor, Tacitus reveals how *Agricola* raises young Britons on Roman luxuries that tend to corruption: "Step by step they were led to things which dispose to vice, the lounge, the bath, the elegant banquet. All this in their ignorance they called civilisation, when it was but a part of their servitude." As well, the subsequent invasion of Caledonia is presented by Tacitus as merely *Agricola's* attempt to find a "source of relief in war"¹⁹ Here, Tacitus himself resembles King's position to some degree, that military expansion is responsible for the war-like state of a subdued nation, and that the nation itself is being undermined, for Tacitus by the "vices" that come with the extravagance of the Empire.

However, there may be a very significant difference of opinion between Tacitus and his characters, and also between King, which would reveal an inclination in favour of Imperial rule, or at least recognizing the positive aspect of Empire. Donald Dudley argues that Tacitus has been credited with writing the "most eloquent defense of Roman imperialism in Latin literature, ending with these words"²⁰ from his *Histories* 4.74:

16. *Ibid.*

17. Tacitus, *Agricola*, 13.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 29.

20. Dudley, Donald R. *The World of Tacitus*. London, England: Secker & Warburg. 1968, 58.

The good fortune and discipline of eight hundred years have built the framework of this empire which will overwhelm its destroyers if destroyed. You stand in the greatest danger who have gold and wealth, the principle causes of war. So cherish and love peace and the city of Rome which both conquers and conquered possess with equal rights. Take heed the lessons of good and bad fortune: do not choose defiance and ruin rather than obedience and prosperity.²¹

While this must be interpreted in light of his careful approach, it is clear that Tacitus admits the longevity and “prosperity” that comes with subjecting to this Empire. However, in light of the speeches as literary devices to express the unending and relentless pursuit of expansion, it is difficult to discern how much in favour Tacitus is of imperial rule.

The speeches of the Britons and Calgacus in the *Agricola* demonstrate an unrest that is caused and perpetuated by the Roman Empire. These speeches urge the Britons to return to their natural state of freedom through active resistance. Throughout Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech, we see a very similar view of Empire expressed, but the resolution is an act of humility on the part of the America. King reveals the international and civic consequences which will occur and perpetuate if the war continues. These are closely figured in the writing of Tacitus himself, who does not hesitate to point out the unruliness of *Agricola* against the Britons. However, despite these similarities, Tacitus’ position concerning imperial rule seems to be ambiguous by both criticizing its negative effects against other nations, and at the same time observing the actuality of an undefeated and prosperous Empire.

WORKS CITED

- Cornelius Tacitus, *Life of Agricola* (selections). Translated by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodrribb, with modernisation by J. Mitchell. CLASS 1010 In-class handout. Dalhousie University. March 2016.
- Dudley, Donald R. *The World of Tacitus*. London, England: Secker & Warburg. 1968
- King, Martin Luther. *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*. Speech, Riverside Church in New York City. April 4, 1967.
- Syme, Sir Ronald. *Ten Studies in Tacitus*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.
- Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*. Translated by H. Mattingly. Translation revised by S.A. Handford. London, England: Penguin Press, 1948.
- , *The Histories*.

21. Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.74.