

According to the *Res Gestae* and Suetonius' *Life of Augustus*, how effective were Augustus' reforms to the Roman army and senate?

Augustus (born Gaius Octavius Thurinus), claimed by some to be the first Roman emperor, made many reforms to the Roman army and senate which strengthened his rule and increased the power, influence and control of the empire. Augustus' reforms redrew and secured the frontiers of the empire and made the army far more efficient and manageable. Other reforms restored the respect and credibility of the senate and made it more efficient at the same time, just as he did with the army. A lot of the information about these reforms comes from two major historical sources, the first being the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* – written by Augustus himself. It is an account of his achievements, similar to an autobiography but more factual rather than opinionated in nature. As it was written by Augustus, it creates the problem of neutrality, bias and a vested interest to lie to improve the way that he is viewed by those reading it – much like a piece of propaganda. Undeniably, the *Res Gestae* provides many facts that are true and it is implausible that Augustus could've made up facts that were wholly untrue but many things such as assassinations and battles are glossed over and mention only in passing or indirectly. The *Res Gestae* does, however, provide insight into how Augustus himself saw life and times in the Roman empire. The second main source is Suetonius' *Life of Augustus* which is an account by a historian and biographer who lived and wrote about 100 years after the death of Augustus. He had access to the imperial archives so his accounts can be seen as mostly accurate. Nonetheless, the book is filled with gossip and rumours which cannot be taken entirely seriously. These two sources indicate that Augustus' reforms to both the senate and army were effective and strengthened his rule as emperor.

Not many reforms were more important, yet basic, than that of the reintroduction of discipline to the Roman army. Augustus was a prestigious leader and he brought back the severity that the Roman army once had, not only making them fear punishment but the troops were also made to feel proud of their regiment, as Suetonius describes how “Augustus [...] exacted the strictest discipline.” (Suet. *Life of Augustus*, 24, p57) This reform was brought in to make the army more efficient in several ways and just as much on the battlefield as when training. Augustus also, “gave the entire tenth legion an ignominious discharge because of their insolent behaviour” (Suet. *Life of Augustus*, 24, p57). Augustus was visibly a strict leader who did not tolerate unsatisfactory service in the army. This meant that having a lower number of troops did not necessarily mean that the army was any weaker. This particular reform was quite clearly very effective as now the troops were more prepared for war and to keep peace in the provinces. As can be seen by the fact that the gates of the Temple of Janus were closed three times during Augustus' tenure, “The Temple of Janus Quirinus which had been closed no more than twice since the foundation of Rome, he closed three times during a far shorter period, as a sign that the empire was at peace on land and at sea.” (Suet. *Life of Augustus*, 22, p56) and in the *Res Gestae* as told by Augustus himself, “from the foundation of the city down to my birth, tradition records it that it was shut only twice, but while I was the leading citizen the senate resolved that it should be shut on three occasions.” (*Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 13, p25) This shows that the empire was at peace, and the way to keep it at peace was through keeping the provinces under control, achieved through controlling the army which, due to the discipline reforms was easier and more efficient.

An effective practice by Augustus was that of reserving the higher posts in the army to his own family members and men of at least consular or praetorian rank. This could be considered unfair

because it would mean those not part of Augustus' family or close circle of friends would not be able to reach the higher posts due to the discrimination, but those deserving of the posts because of reaching high rank would be more than suitable to run the army. Suetonius states that Augustus "allowed any township to nominate men capable of taking up such senior army posts as were reserved for the Equestrian Order." (Suetonius, Life of Augustus) This practice would imply that Augustus was a fair ruler and appointed men justly. These posts were mostly administrative, though, whereas the centurions were chosen from the 'rank and file' and promoted using a complex system, ensuring the quality of the appointment. (Cary & Scullard, A History of Rome) This was another effective and efficient reform which ensured military quality and discipline, in turn, making the army more prosperous and well-led.

Suetonius states that the two faults which "[Augustus] condemned most in a military commander were haste and recklessness" and he only fought battles if the "hope of victory was clearly greater than the fear of defeat." This style of leadership was, yet again, much more efficient and effective since it would have minimised losses and reckless defeats in the field, raised morale and strengthened the trust in their leader. These being more ways to make the army as powerful and superior as possible when compared to those of barbarians in the far away lands. Although, as much as Augustus would have tried to minimise losses, his reforms were not always perfect as exemplified by the embarrassing loss caused by the general Varus in which 3 troops were massacred when recklessly led into a forest leading to them being ambushed.

Augustus' reforms to the senate were no less significant, and the reason and drive behind the reforms was to make the Senate more effective as a government, making them more respectable in his eyes and in the eyes of the Roman citizens. Suetonius described this situation by claiming that "The sight of this sad and ill-assorted rabble decided Augustus to restore the Order to its former size and repute by two new acts of enrolment." (Suetonius, Life of Augustus) Augustus was clearly not satisfied with the members of the senate and wanted to restore the Senate's former glory and reputation in the eyes of the Roman people as they had become "popularly known as the 'Orcus Men'". Orcus was God of the underworld, so it could be interpreted as men of the underworld or servants of the god of the underworld, which is a clear indicator that the senators weren't particularly highly regarded and were, to some extent, ridiculed by the people of Rome, which would no doubt motivate Augustus to restore the senate to its former glory.

However, it would also seem that he reformed the senate in such a way that would be beneficial to himself. As can be observed in Suetonius, the senatorial reforms were effective and disguised the fact that Augustus was in control well, for example, letting "each senator nominate one other" and then choosing who to rid of himself. He made it seem that the reforms were only intended to democratise the proceedings and make the Senate more respected, which they did, but they were also intended to suit his needs and allow him to continue cleverly keeping control of rule over the Empire without people realising that he was doing so.

The choosing of senators was reformed and now, "each member was allowed to nominate one other" (Suetonius, Life of Augustus, p. 66) to be removed from senate, and "then Augustus and Agrippa together reviewed the list and announced their own choice." Using this Augustus could get rid of senators that he did not agree with. He was careful and did not allow anyone to approach him in the chair, "except singly and after the folds in their robes had been searched". He was well aware of his father's downfall and took precautions to avoid the same happening to him. So, he

effectively reduced the senate and avoided certain consequences when ridding of the “rabble” of the senate.

One of the reforms was that “During debates of critical importance Augustus shelved the custom of calling on members in order of seniority, and instead singled out speakers arbitrarily; this was intended to make all present take an alert interest in proceedings and feel responsible for constructive thought.” (Suetonius, *Life of Augustus*, p. 66) Suetonius states that intention of that reform was to make the members more alert, yet it's also obvious that Augustus wanted to be completely in control of who spoke during important debates as that would mean that he was the one who chose what was said which could be used to his advantage letting people with an opinion which he agreed with speak in the senate. This probably worked very effectively in Augustus' favour as he not only made it seem that the senate was functioning better but he was also in complete control of it.

To make the Senate more effective and less of a burden on the senators, Augustus reduced the amount of meetings, as testified by Suetonius, “Such meetings should not be held more than twice a month” (Suetonius, *Life of Augustus*, p. 66) This reform would make the prospect of being a senator more attractive and according to Suetonius the intention of it was to make it, “less inconvenient”. It could be presumed that some senators did not turn up to meetings and didn't care about what was going on politically, instead lavishing in the elite status of senators, even if they were seen negatively by many. This was an effective reform as there was no need for the senate to meet as frequently and reducing the amount of meetings would make the post of senator more attractive. Some senators were chosen to meet more frequently to pass decrees but not so many senators were needed to, as can be observed in Suetonius, “provide a quorum for passing of decrees.”

According to Suetonius, Augustus “banned publications of the *Proceedings of the Senate*”. In Suetonius, there isn't a given reason why this practice, started by Julius Caesar, was abolished. Possibly, Augustus wanted to keep the proceedings less public to stop people knowing what he was doing in the Senate so that any kind of, possibly secret, information would not spread too fast or quickly from the Senate. This can also be seen in Suetonius' *Life of Augustus*, where Pinarius, a Roman knight, was “stabbed there and then as taking too close an interest in the proceedings” when seen to be transcribing Augustus' speech. It would seem that Augustus didn't like people taking too close an interest in proceedings for some strange personal reasons, possibly.

According to both Suetonius and the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, Augustus reformed the senate and the army in a way that benefited the Empire, him and made it look like he was being completely and absolutely selfless, when in some cases it is clear that he introduced reforms mostly to suit himself. Suetonius emphasises that Augustus was unhappy with the state of the Senate and that he reformed it because it was not as great as it once was. However, it can also be deduced that the senatorial reforms were definitely suited to strengthen the personal power desired by Augustus as he could now control the topics and speakers to suit his own preference. This meant that the reforms were effective in both ways – to strengthen his rule and to make the Empire more powerful and prosperous. His military reforms were intended to keep the Empire at peace, and expand to the critical amount, which were both done effectively, according to Suetonius. Allegedly, a testament of Augustus warned against expanding the empire which would imply that Augustus military reforms were not especially expansive as much as aimed at making the army more effective and well-led, as

he did with the Senate. Suetonius documents the reforms introduced well but seems to focus more individual reforms to the senate and more general reforms to the army, which are also fewer in number. It is far less biased than the *Res Gestae*, which doesn't document very many reforms at all concentrating, understandably, on the personal achievements of Augustus as it was written by the man himself resulting in less emphasis on the specific changes made as much as their successes. The two sources document the reforms in detail, and according to them, they were effective and introduced with the best intentions.