
AMERICAN SOCIETY · POWER & ITS CONTRADICTIONS

A Nation in the Dark

When a superpower stops listening — and what a Tang Dynasty proverb tells us about where we are

*"Find enlightenment through heeding many points
of view.*

Find ignorance through heeding few."

"Hear all sides and you will be enlightened.

Hear one and you will be in the dark."

— Tang Dynasty Proverbs, 7th–10th Century China

PART ONE

The Darkness That Does Not Announce Itself

There is a particular kind of darkness that does not announce itself. It does not arrive with a thunderclap or the extinguishing of lights. It settles in slowly — through habit, through comfort, through the quiet narrowing of the world we are willing to hear. By the time we notice it, we have long since forgotten what the light looked like. That is precisely where the United States finds itself today.

The Tang Dynasty emperors of ancient China governed one of history's most cosmopolitan empires — a crossroads of silk routes, religions, and rival philosophies. From this crucible of complexity emerged a governing wisdom as relevant now as it was twelve centuries ago: that the health of a society is measured not by the confidence of its

loudest voices, but by its willingness to entertain the ones that disagree. The two proverbs above were not poetry. They were statecraft. They were survival.

"Hear all sides and you will be enlightened. Hear one and you will be in the dark."

— Tang Dynasty · A warning written for power

We are in the dark.

Not because information is scarce — it has never been more abundant. Not because diverse perspectives don't exist — they are everywhere. We are in the dark because the architecture of modern American life has been engineered, both commercially and psychologically, to funnel us toward the single voice. The algorithm learns what we click and feeds us more of it. The cable channel curates its outrage for our particular brand of fury. The social feed reflects our existing beliefs back at us in an endless hall of affirming mirrors. We have built the most sophisticated echo chamber in human history, and we have moved inside it willingly.

The Machinery of One-Sidedness

Political polarization in America has reached levels that confound social scientists. Research consistently shows that Americans increasingly live in communities, consume media, and maintain friendships almost exclusively with people who share their political identity. This is not a matter of healthy disagreement within a shared framework — it is the atomization of reality itself. The left and right no longer argue from different values about the same facts. They operate from different facts entirely, each convinced the other inhabits a world of fabrication.

The Tang emperor who first articulated the wisdom of many counselors understood something that modern partisans have forgotten:

the person who hears only agreeable voices is not merely less informed — they are actively misled. Consensus within a closed circle is not truth. It is the amplification of shared blind spots. Every historical civilization that has collapsed from within has done so, in part, because the people in power stopped listening to inconvenient voices — until those voices became an inconvenient revolution.

The Cost of Comfortable Certainty

There is a seductive comfort in the single narrative. It is tidier. It requires no tolerance for ambiguity, no painful revision of what we think we know, no humbling encounter with the partial truth in an opposing argument. It feels like clarity. The Tang sages would recognize it for what it actually is: the warm, pleasant sensation of walking deeper into darkness while believing you are moving toward light.

The consequences are not abstract. A democracy depends, at its functional core, on citizens who are capable of disagreeing productively — who share enough common ground in fact and in process to negotiate competing interests. When that shared ground erodes, governance becomes a zero-sum war of occupation. Every election becomes an existential battle. Every policy debate becomes a referendum on whether the other side deserves to exist. This is the America of 2026: not a country divided by difficult questions, but a country that has forgotten how to ask them together.

The Path Back Toward Light

The Tang proverbs are not merely a diagnosis. They are a prescription. Enlightenment, they tell us, is not a gift — it is a practice. It is the daily discipline of heeding many points of view, even when those views are uncomfortable, unflattering, or flatly wrong in ways that require us to understand them before we can answer them. That practice begins not in legislatures or cable studios but in the individual choices of

citizens — what we read, who we speak to, which discomfort we decide to tolerate.

The darkness the ancient scholars warned against is not inevitable. History offers examples of societies that stepped back from the brink of self-reinforcing ignorance — not through unanimity, but through the hard-won recovery of a shared commitment to hearing the other side. The question for America is not whether it retains the capacity for that recovery. The question is whether it retains the will. To find out, we would first have to stop talking long enough to listen.

PART TWO

The Superpower That Forgot How to Think: Dysfunction at the Summit of Power

There is a peculiar tragedy in being a superpower undone not by a rival's strength but by its own fractured mind. History offers prior examples — Rome hollowed from within by factional contempt, the late Ottoman court so absorbed in internal intrigue that it missed the century turning around it — but the American case carries a uniquely modern character. The dysfunction is not hidden in palace corridors. It is broadcast, streamed, liked, and shared in real time: a civilization narrating its own unraveling in high definition.

To speak of superpower dysfunction is not hyperbole. It is the honest description of a measurable gap — between what the United States is capable of and what it actually produces. The capability remains staggering: the world's largest economy, the most extensive network of military alliances ever assembled, universities that attract the planet's best minds, a constitutional framework that has absorbed upheavals that would have shattered lesser states. The production, however,

increasingly looks like a nation consuming its own infrastructure rather than building on it.

I. The Paralysis of Governance

The most visible symptom is legislative. Congress — the body constitutionally charged with the nation's direction — has become less a deliberative assembly than a theater of performative opposition. The business of the institution is no longer chiefly the passage of law but the staging of conflict for partisan audiences. Bills are written to fail. Hearings are conducted to produce clips. Shutdowns are wielded not as last resorts but as opening moves. The ancient Tang counsel to hear all sides before acting has been inverted: the explicit strategy of modern American politics is to ensure the other side is never heard at all — to run out the clock, poison the well, and declare the absence of compromise a kind of victory.

The result is a government structurally incapable of addressing the scale of challenges it faces. Infrastructure rated as failing by engineers. A healthcare system that costs twice the wealthy-nation average while producing middling outcomes. A housing crisis metastasizing from coastal cities into the heartland. A national debt whose trajectory no serious economist regards as sustainable. These are not ideological problems without technical solutions — engineers, doctors, economists, and urban planners can describe what would help. They are political problems, jammed in the gears of a system where acknowledging the other side's facts has become a form of surrender.

II. The Intelligence Deficit

Superpowers require accurate intelligence — not merely in the covert sense, but in the broader one: an accurate picture of the world as it actually is, including the parts that are uncomfortable. The Tang proverb's warning about 'heeding few' is, at its core, a warning about the corruption of information. A ruler who surrounds himself with voices that

confirm his worldview does not become more confident — he becomes more wrong, with more certainty. The American information environment has industrialized this error at a scale no dynasty could have imagined.

The fracture is not simply that Americans disagree — disagreement is healthy, generative, the engine of democratic self-correction. The fracture is that disagreement now operates on separated factual substrates. Multiple studies document what daily experience confirms: Americans who consume different media do not merely hold different opinions about shared facts; they report different facts entirely. The unemployment rate, the crime rate, the state of the border, the safety of vaccines — these are not contested interpretations of common data. For a significant portion of the population, they exist in different epistemological universes, each internally self-confirming.

A superpower navigating a complex, rapidly shifting world on the basis of internally coherent but mutually contradictory realities is not making decisions. It is gambling — and gambling with enormous stakes, because the decisions it avoids or gets wrong do not stay within its borders.

"Find enlightenment through heeding many points of view. Find ignorance through heeding few."

— Tang Dynasty · The diagnostic that still applies

III. The Abdication of Global Credibility

Superpower status is not only material. It is, in large part, a function of perceived coherence — the sense among allies and adversaries alike that the nation's commitments are durable, its institutions stable, its word worth something across changes in administration. The United States has historically derived enormous practical power from this perception. It lowered the cost of alliances, elevated the value of its currency, and allowed it to set rules for international systems it benefited from.

That credibility is eroding, and the erosion is a direct product of domestic dysfunction. When a treaty ratified in one administration is abandoned in the next as a domestic political gesture, allies begin to hedge. When the machinery of democratic transition becomes a contested spectacle, the authoritarian argument that democracy is merely organized chaos gains traction in capitals that were previously unconvinced. When domestic polarization renders consistent foreign policy impossible, rivals learn to wait — understanding that the agreement on the table today may be politically toxic by the following election cycle.

China, for its part, does not need to defeat the United States in direct confrontation to achieve a strategic realignment of global influence. It needs only to be the more predictable actor — the party that shows up and delivers, regardless of what its domestic politics are doing that week. The irony is exquisite: the nation whose ancient sages counseled listening to all sides now projects a patience and coherence in international affairs that the United States, whose founders also counseled deliberation, increasingly cannot match.

The parallel that should unsettle us

The Tang Dynasty that produced these proverbs eventually collapsed — not because its wisdom was wrong, but because its later emperors stopped applying it. Court factions drowned out inconvenient counsel. Regional powers filled the vacuum left by central paralysis. The dynasty's final century was not a sudden fall but a long, loud unraveling that its inhabitants experienced as normal, right up until it wasn't.

IV. The Social Body in Conflict with Itself

Beneath the governance failures and geopolitical retreat lies something more intimate and harder to measure: the fraying of the social connective tissue that makes a nation more than a geographic designation. Civic life — the churches, unions, community organizations,

neighborhood associations, and informal networks that Tocqueville identified as America's unique democratic immune system — has been in documented decline for decades. What has replaced those structures, in part, is identity-tribal affiliation organized around media consumption and political allegiance. The result is a population that is, paradoxically, more connected and more isolated than at any point in modern history.

The human cost of this is not merely political. Loneliness, distrust of institutions, declining faith in the future — these are not aesthetic concerns. They are public health crises, economic drags, and the psychological preconditions for radicalization. A society in which citizens increasingly regard half their fellow citizens not as political opponents to be persuaded but as enemies to be defeated is not a society capable of the collective action that genuine challenges require. It cannot, by definition, hear all sides. It has already decided that some sides are not worth hearing.

The Tang proverb does not promise that heeding many voices will produce agreement. It promises something more modest and more valuable: enlightenment. The ability to see clearly. To understand the shape of the problem before reaching for the solution. That is what is absent in the American discourse of this moment — not passion, not conviction, not even intelligence, but the foundational willingness to look at the world as it is rather than as our preferred narrative requires it to be.

V. What Superpower Dysfunction Costs the World

It would be a comfort to regard this as purely an American problem, contained within American borders, to be resolved by American voters in their own time. It is not. The international order constructed after 1945 — imperfect, often hypocritical, but broadly stabilizing — was built on American engagement. Climate agreements require American capacity. Global health infrastructure requires American funding. The deterrence

calculus that has kept great-power war at bay for eight decades requires American coherence. When the superpower is too busy fighting itself to show up consistently, the vacuum does not remain empty.

This is the final, heaviest weight of the Tang indictment. The darkness that comes from heeding one side is not private. It spills. A superpower governed by fractured epistemology and performative conflict does not merely harm itself — it destabilizes the systems it was supposed to anchor. The ancient counsel was offered to emperors because emperors had power, and the misuse of that power had consequences that radiated outward in every direction. The United States is not an empire. But it is, still, the closest thing the modern world has to a hegemon. What it chooses not to hear will be felt by people who had no say in the choice.

The proverbs of the Tang court were not written for an America that did not yet exist. But they were written for power — and for the particular blindness that power cultivates when it stops listening. The diagnosis is twelve centuries old. The patient is urgently contemporary.

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