

What is the American Dream?

Background Essay

What is the American Dream?

The term was first used by James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America* which was written in 1931. He states: "The American Dream is "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." (p.214-215)

In the United States' Declaration of Independence, our founding fathers: "...held certain truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." Might this sentiment be considered the foundation of the American Dream?

Were homesteaders who left the big cities of the east to find happiness and their piece of land in the unknown wilderness pursuing these inalienable Rights? Were the immigrants who came to the United States looking for their bit of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, their Dream? And what did the desire of the veteran of World War II - to settle down, to have a home, a car and a family - tell us about this evolving Dream? Is the American Dream attainable by all Americans? Would Martin Luther King feel his Dream was attained?

Some say, that the American Dream has become the pursuit of material prosperity - that people work more hours to get bigger cars, fancier homes, the fruits of prosperity for their families - but have less time to enjoy their prosperity. Others say that the American Dream is beyond the grasp of the working poor who must work two jobs to insure their family's survival. Yet others look toward a new American Dream with less focus on financial gain and more emphasis on living a simple, fulfilling life.

Thomas Wolfe said, "...to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining, golden opportunitythe right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him."

Is this your American Dream?

Appendix #25

The American Dream: Excerpts from On-line Articles

“The American Dream” from Wikipedia

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Dream)

“The **American Dream** is a subjective term usually implying a successful and satisfying life. This term usually implies financial security and material comfort, but can also imply a dream of fame, exceeding social, ethnic, or class boundaries, or simply living a fulfilling life. Perceptions of the American dream are usually framed in terms of American capitalism, its associated purported meritocracy (Americans are more likely than any other democracy to believe that people succeed because of actual individual talents, efforts, and accomplishments rather than the social class into which they are born.), and the freedoms guaranteed by the U.S. Bill of Rights.

The term is not easily defined, and has subjective meaning to many who claim it. The American Dream is often associated with immigration, as the dream of religious freedom, economic prosperity, and opportunity has historically driven immigrants to the United States. The term is used by many modern Americans to signify success in life as a result of hard work (as in, ‘living [or pursuing] the American Dream’).

There are many books, plays and other forms of literature which have defined, explored or denounced the American Dream. Some more well known examples are:

- Horatio Alger's books
- *The Great Gatsby*
- *Death of a Salesman*
- *A Raisin in the Sun*
- *Of Mice and Men*
- *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*
- *The American Dream* by Edward Albee
- *Rags to Riches* by Richard T. Farmer

“Who Wants to Be a Millionaire”

(http://www.americansc.org.uk/Online/American_Dream.htm)

Matthew Warshauer, Professor of History at Central Connecticut State University, says, “Traditionally, Americans have sought to realize the American dream of success, fame and wealth through thrift and hard work. However, the industrialization of the 19th and 20th centuries began to erode the dream, replacing it with a philosophy of ‘get rich quick.’ A variety of seductive but elusive strategies have evolved, and today the *three* leading ways to instant wealth are **large-prize television game shows**, **big-jackpot state lotteries** and **compensation lawsuits**.

Appendix #26

Contributor: Tiffany
Location: Littleton, CO
Country: United States of America
Series: Contemporary
Dreams

Does hard work actually pay off? I believe it does with the American Dream; Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, because when there is a will there is a way.

My parents were immigrants from Vietnam after and during the war. They came over to America looking to accomplish their dreams and have a life that they can look back and smile on. People from every way of life came to accomplish the American dream.

My father is a great, hardworking and loving family man. He came over to America when he was about 13. He didn't know any English and he was not familiar with this new world that was laid out in front of him. I believe he is a man that can overcome anything. He learned how to speak and write English fluently in just a year. He graduated college working many jobs to pay for, got a job, and had a family. He has seen death and sadness in his family but he still came over it. My dad is a strong man; he is the glue that holds this family together. He helps us with life decisions and keeps us close as a family, with my brothers, mother, grandpa, and cousins.

My mother was about 17 when she came over to America. She is a very hardworking person and has a will do anything. My mom has gone through a lot to get to America and accomplished her American dream. She learned how to speak English and got a great job. My mom pushes me to do great things; things I thought were impossible. She wants me to do well in life and to accomplish all my dreams. The dream to finish high school with high honors, to finish college and get a job that I love, and to run a successful business; those are my dreams, not my parents, not anyone else's, but my own dreams. That is the kind of dream my parents know I can do with hard work and a will to do good, so that I can look back on my life and smile just like them. This dream is a dream that my parents have accomplished and a dream that I want to accomplish also. The

American Dream.

Appendix #27a

Contributor: Cole
Location: state college, PA
Country: United States of America
Series: Contemporary
April 19, 2006

The Ideal American Dream

I am 23 years old and about to walk into the fire known as the real world. It is now my time to take steps towards the ideal American Dream. The clock is ticking, and the time that I have to complete this dream is limited. I need to be married with 2 ½ kids living in a white house with blue shutters and a picket fence located in a high class suburb before I turn 30.

Is this what people expect out of everyone? Why do I need to live there? What if I want to have four kids? What if I hate picket fences?

The American Dream should be what each individual wants to make of it. There should be no regulations or even expectations for another person's "American Dream." Make of this what you like, but my American Dream is exactly that: MY American Dream. It is not ours to share. You have your own, and I have my own; everyone has their own.

I like what I like because I like it. Nobody tells me to like grilled ham and cheese sandwiches, I just do. There is no rhyme or reason to it, but I like what I like and that's that. I do not like pineapple or coconut, but I do like pina-coladas; I can not explain it but that's what I like. In the future, if I am happy and the people close to me are happy than I have accomplished my ideal American Dream. I really do not care if I have millions of dollars and can buy whatever I want to, because I have never been able to do such a thing and do not think that it is important in my life to be able to do so. I want to be happy and I want my family to be happy. This is what I believe because of what I like and enjoy doing. These are just a few examples of what I believe in and MY reasoning behind them. You do not have to like them or agree with them; you can take YOUR own views and set YOUR own American Dream.

I believe in this method of discovering the American Dream because of how I was brought up and what was important to keep my family happy and living what they believe is the American Dream.

Find your own American Dream. Take notice on the aspects of life that you feel are important to YOU and what YOU want.

Appendix #27b

Contributor: Christine
Location: Austin, TX
Country: United States of America
Series: Contemporary

American Dream

I believe in America. I believe in being an American. I believe in the American Dream. But, most of all, I believe in working hard. All of us, either a recent immigrant, or a descendent of one, at one point, came to America to seek a dream. For Columbus, it was an opportunity to discover something new, the Puritans, to practice their beliefs. My parents, who were Chinese immigrants, came to America for prosperity. They wanted a chance to give their children a chance. They knew that here is all about equality: equal chances, equal rights, and equal prosperity. I, too, believe in the American Dream.

What is the American Dream? Is it material wealth? Is it how successful you become? Is it to live a long healthy life? When do you know you've achieved it? When do I know I've achieved it? I believe that if I am living in America. I have already achieved half of it. So many people would gamble their whole life just for a ticket to America. Constantly there are Mexicans illegally crossing the border into this Land of Liberty. They cross because they too want a slice of the American Dream. I look around, and I see those who take advantage of this Dream. Those who already have been served their slice, but waste it away, not savoring the whole of their precious asset. While others, less fortunate clamor and desperately grab for even a sliver. The American Dream is being able to reap the benefits of what you put out. So many places in the world this is impossible. Yet, here in America, this sort of thing is common.

My father came to America in pursuit of his American dream. He had lived his childhood in the uncomfortable little room that he had to squeeze in with his 3 other siblings, enduring taunts at school for his broken shoes. Not to mention his birthdays without presents "Many years ago when I used to walk home from school, I would always walk past this toy store, and I saw a model of a fire truck that I desperately wanted. I wanted it so much that everyday after school, I would walk by and stand in front of the window, imagining all the things I could do with it, and what I would trade for it—I thought anything," he tells me, "I remember it was my 9th birthday, and I had already hoped for this fire truck for over 3 months. I just on the tip of my toes waiting to see if that were to be my present. But when all the family came home at night, no one even mentioned my birthday—I guess it was because my parents had too many children, so it was just too much to remember everyone, no one was special. That's how you feel in many places out of America, you feel like a duplicate, without uniqueness. I was too naïve to see my present was out of the question." Later he mentions the truck was bought, "—that day, I could feel myself drop. I was hoping so much for that red truck model, but what can I do? Nothing. That was my life, my parents worked hard, but they were never able to rise. Here in America, it's different, there is no reason why you shouldn't rise, and opportunities are everywhere."

Working hard is the key to achieving the American Dream. Being here, you've already achieved half of the American Dream, but to achieve the other part, you must put in effort. I believe the American Dream is real. Wishing upon a star will not make it come true. It takes you and me, to make it happen. This I believe.