

## The American Dream: Myth or Reality?

The **American Dream** is the idea (often associated with the Protestant work ethic) held by many in the United States of America that through hard work, courage and determination one could achieve prosperity. These were values held by many early European settlers, and have been passed on to subsequent generations. What the American dream has become is a question under constant discussion.



The origin of the American Dream, a term coined by James Truslow Adams in his book The Epics of America (1931), stems from the departure in government and economics from the models of the Old World. Additionally, from the American Revolutionary War well into the later half of the eighteenth century, many of America's physical resources were unclaimed and held out the promise of land ownership and lucky investment in land or industry in the nineteenth century. In the American dream apples are usually associated with success. The development of the Industrial Revolution combined with the great natural resources of the enormous and as yet unsettled (by Europeans) continent created the possibility of achieving wealth and transitioning "from rags to riches".

The living conditions in Europe and the hope of a better standard of living in America led to the migration of hundreds of thousands to the new world. Impoverished western Europeans escaping the potato famines in Ireland, the Highland clearances in Scotland and the aftermath of Napoleon in the rest of Europe went to America to escape their old life. They had heard about the government in America and hoped for an escape from their old life.

The Industrial Revolution was one of the great forces that developed the American Dream. The development of big business, the Transcontinental Railroad, and the increase in oil production greatly increased the American standard of living. "Rags to riches" stories of business tycoons like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller led to the belief that if you had talent and worked extremely hard, you were more likely to live a successful life.

"The ideal of freedom and opportunity that motivated the Founding Fathers; the spiritual strength of the nation. Katherine Lee Bates wrote in 1893 'America the Beautiful' of a 'patriot dream that sees beyond the years.' In 1960 the poet Archibald MacLeish, debating 'national purpose,' said: 'There are those, I know, who will reply that the liberation of humanity, the freedom of man and mind, is nothing but a dream. They are right, It is. It is the American dream.' The American Dream, to some, stresses opportunity. The phrase defies definition as much as it invites discussion. As a force behind government philosophy, it seems to be interpreted by most users as a combination of freedom and opportunity with growing overtones of social justice" - From "Safire's New Political Dictionary" by William Safire (Random House, New York, 1993).

### Historical Origins

The American Dream could be said to have existed really as far back as the founding of the Thirteen Colonies. People risked the dangerous Atlantic crossing in order to begin a new life in America where one could become wealthy and (supposedly) free from prejudices of any sort.

The 19th century however, is the era in which the American Dream was the strongest. During the California Gold Rush of 1849, thousands flocked to America in order to seek their fortunes in gold.

The advancements in technology in the late 20th century resulted in unparalleled economic growth. The arrival of computers, the Internet, and other modern technologies created hundreds of thousands of high-paying jobs and increased the national standard of living.

## Criticism

The United States has been criticized for failing to live up to the ideal of success available to everyone who is willing to work hard. High paying jobs in the United States increasingly require some sort of college or university degree, but higher education can be very expensive, around \$10,000 per year at public institutions on average, going up to as high as \$50,000 per year at the most prestigious private colleges (NYU, for example, has increased its tuition to around \$49,000 for the 2007-2008 school year. Financial aid is widely available, whereby the poorest students are increasingly being given guarantees of a high proportion (up to 100%) of grants, removing the obligation to pay back their university; or low-interest student loans, which are tax-deductible. However, for those without need-based or merit aid, the costs of higher education can be prohibitively expensive, which can act as a bar from entering professions that require a college degree. Henceforth, the inability to obtain a quality education is a major factor in the ability to capture the American Dream.

Automobile ownership has technically become compulsory in the United States, leading to a civil rights issue that author Joel S. Hirschorn calls *automobile apartheid*, meaning that persons who cannot drive or do not own automobiles are discriminated against and denied freedom of mobility. Many analysts disagree on whether the American Dream should be about driving automobiles or using cheap, readily available public transit.

## References to Check Out

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- Samuelson, Robert J. (1995). *The Good Life and Its Discontents: The American Dream in the Age of Its Entitlement, 1945–1995*. New York: Vintage, 1997 paperback: ISBN 0-679-78152-8. Suggests raising the retirement age and means testing of entitlements to manage unfunded government commitments

