Rethinking the American Dream

Along with millions of jobs and 401(k)s, the concept of a shared national ideal is said to be dying. But is the American Dream really endangered, or has it simply been misplaced? Exploring the way our aspirations have changed—the rugged individualism of the Wild West, the social compact of F.D.R., the sitcom fantasy of 50s suburbia—the author shows how the American Dream came to mean fame and fortune, instead of the promise that shaped a nation.

BY DAVID KAMP
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The year was 1930, a down one like this one. But for Moss Hart, it was the time for his particularly American moment of triumph. He had grown up poor in the outer boroughs of New York City—“the grim smell of actual want always at the end of my nose,” he said—and he’d vowed that if he ever made it big he would never again ride the rattling trains of the city’s dingy subway system. Now he was 25, and his first play, Once in a Lifetime, had just opened to raves on Broadway. And so, with three newspapers under his arm and a wee-hours celebration of a successful opening night behind him, he hailed a cab and took a long, leisurely sunrise ride back to the apartment in Brooklyn where he still lived with his parents and brother.

Crossing the Brooklyn Bridge into one of the several drab tenement neighborhoods that preceded his own, Hart later recalled, “I stared through the taxi window at a pinch-faced 10-year-old hurrying down the steps on some morning errand before school, and I thought of myself hurrying down the street on so many gray mornings out of a doorway and a house much the same as this one.... It was possible in this wonderful city for that nameless little boy—for any of its millions—to have a decent chance to scale the walls and achieve what they wished. Wealth, rank, or an imposing name counted for nothing. The only credential the city asked was the boldness to dream.”

As the boy ducked into a tailor shop, Hart recognized that this narrative was not exclusive to his “wonderful city”—it was one that could happen anywhere in, and only in, America. “A surge of shamefaced patriotism overwhelmed me,” Hart wrote in his memoir, Act One. “I might have been watching a victory parade on a flag-draped Fifth Avenue instead of the mean streets of a city slum. A feeling of patriotism, however, is not always limited to the feverish emotions called forth by war. It can sometimes be felt as profoundly and perhaps more truly at a moment such as this.”

Hart, like so many before and after him, was overcome by the power of the American Dream. As a people, we Americans are unique in having such a thing, a more or less Official National Dream. (There is no correspondingly stirring Canadian Dream or Slovakian Dream.) It is part of our charter—as articulated in the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, in the famous bit about “certain unalienable Rights” that...
include “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”—and it is what makes our country and our way of life attractive and magnetic to people in other lands.

But now fast-forward to the year 2009, the final Friday of January. The new president is surveying the dire economy he has been charged with righting—600,000 jobs lost in January alone, a gross domestic product that shrank 3.8 percent in the final quarter of 2008, the worst contraction in almost 30 years. Assessing these numbers, Barack Obama, a man who normally exudes hopefulness for a living, pronounces them a “continuing disaster for America’s working families,” a disaster that amounts to no less, he says, than “the American Dream in reverse.”

In reverse. Imagine this in terms of Hart’s life: out of the taxicab, back on the subway, back to the tenements, back to cramped cohabitation with Mom and Dad, back to gray mornings and the grim smell of actual want.

You probably don’t even have to imagine, for chances are that of late you have experienced some degree of reversal yourself, or at the very least have had friends or loved ones get laid off, lose their homes, or just find themselves forced to give up certain perks and amenities (restaurant meals, cable TV, salon haircuts) that were taken for granted as recently as a year ago.

These are tough times for the American Dream. As the safe routines of our lives have come undone, so has our characteristic optimism—not only our belief that the future is full of limitless possibility, but our faith that things will eventually return to normal, whatever “normal” was before the recession hit. There is even worry that the dream may be over—that we currently living Americans are the unfortunate ones who shall bear witness to that deflating moment in history when the promise of this country began to wither. This is the “sapping of confidence” that President Obama alluded to in his inaugural address, the “nagging fear that America’s decline is inevitable, and that the next generation must lower its sights.”

But let’s face it: If Moss Hart, like so many others, was able to rally from the depths of the Great Depression, then surely the viability of the American Dream isn’t in question. What needs to change is our expectation of what the dream promises—and our understanding of what that vague and promiscuously used term, “the American Dream,” is really supposed to mean.

In recent years, the term has often been interpreted to mean “making it big” or “striking it rich.” (As the cult of Brian De Palma’s Scarface has grown, so, disturbingly, has the number of people with a literal, celebratory read on its tagline: “He loved the American Dream. With a vengeance.”) Even when the phrase isn’t being used to describe the accumulation of great wealth, it’s frequently deployed to denote extreme success of some kind or other. Last year, I heard commentators say that Barack Obama achieved the American Dream by getting elected president, and that Philadelphia Phillies manager Charlie Manuel achieved the American Dream by leading his team to its first World Series title since 1980.

Yet there was never any promise or intimation of extreme success in the book that popularized the term, The Epic of America, by James Truslow Adams, published by Little, Brown and Company in 1931. (Yes, “the American Dream” is a surprisingly recent coinage; you’d think that these words would appear in the writings of Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin, but they don’t.) For a book that has made such a lasting contribution to our vocabulary, The Epic of America is an offbeat piece of work—a sweeping, essayistic, highly subjective survey of this country’s development from Columbus’s landfall onward, written by a respected but solemn historian whose prim prose style was mocked as “spinach” by the waggish theater critic Alexander Woollcott.

But it’s a smart, thoughtful treatise. Adams’s goal wasn’t so much to put together a proper history of the U.S. as to determine, by tracing his country’s path to prominence, what makes this land so unlike other nations, so uniquely American. (That he undertook such an enterprise when he did, in the same grim climate in which Hart wrote Once in a Lifetime, reinforces how indomitably strong Americans’ faith in their country remained during the Depression.) What Adams came up with was a construct he called “that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank.”

From the get-go, Adams emphasized the egalitarian nature of this dream. It started to take shape, he said, with the Puritans who fled religious persecution in England and settled New England in the 17th century. “[Their] migration was not like so many earlier ones in history, led by warrior lords with followers dependent on them,” he wrote, “but was one in which the common man as well as the leader was hoping for greater freedom and happiness for himself and his children.”

The Declaration of Independence took this concept even further, for it compelled the well-to-do upper classes to put the common man on an equal footing with them where human rights and self-governance were concerned—a nose-holding concession that Adams captured with exquisite comic passiveness in the sentence, “It
had been found necessary to base the [Declaration's] argument at last squarely on the rights of man.” Whereas
the colonist upper classes were asserting their independence from the British Empire, “the lower classes were
thinking not only of that,” Adams wrote, “but of their relations to their colonial legislatures and governing class.”


America was truly a new world, a place where one could live one’s life and pursue one’s goals
unburdened by older societies’ prescribed ideas of class, caste, and social hierarchy. Adams was unreserved in
his wonderment over this fact. Breaking from his formal tone, he shifted into first-person mode in The Epic of
America’s epilogue, noting a French guest’s remark that his most striking impression of the United States was
“the way that everyone of every sort looks you right in the eye, without a thought of inequality.” Adams also told
a story of “a foreigner” he used to employ as an assistant, and how he and this foreigner fell into a habit of
chitchatting for a bit after their day’s work was done. “Such a relationship was the great difference between
America and his homeland,” Adams wrote. “There, he said, ‘I would do my work and might get a pleasant word,
but I could never sit and talk like this. There is a difference there between social grades which cannot be got over.
I would not talk to you there as man to man, but as my employer.’”

A
necdotal as these examples are, they get to the crux of the American Dream as Adams saw it: that
life in the United States offered personal liberties and opportunities to a degree unmatched by any other country
in history—a circumstance that remains true today, some ill-considered clampdowns in the name of Homeland
Security notwithstanding. This invigorating sense of possibility, though it is too often taken for granted, is the
great gift of Americanness. Even Adams underestimated it. Not above the prejudices of his time, he certainly
never saw Barack Obama’s presidency coming. While he correctly anticipated the eventual assimilation of the
millions of Eastern and Southern European immigrants who arrived in the early 20th century to work in
America’s factories, mines, and sweatshops, he entertained no such hopes for black people. Or, as he rather
injudiciously put it, “After a generation or two, [the white-ethnic laborers] can be absorbed, whereas the negro
cannot.”

It’s also worth noting that Adams did not deny that there is a material component to the American Dream. The Epic of America offers several variations on Adams’s definition of the dream (e.g., “the American
dream that life should be made richer and fuller for everyone and opportunity remain open to all”), but the word
“richer” appears in all of them, and he wasn’t just talking about richness of experience. Yet Adams was careful
not to overstate what the dream promises. In one of his final iterations of the “American Dream” trope, he
described it as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with
opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.”

That last part—“according to his ability or achievement”—is the tempering phrase, a shrewd bit of
expectations management. A “better and richer life” is promised, but for most people this won’t be a rich
person’s life. “Opportunity for each” is promised, but within the bounds of each person’s ability; the reality is,
some people will realize the American Dream more stupendously and significantly than others. (For example,
while President Obama is correct in saying, “Only in America is my story possible,” this does not make it true
that anyone in America can be the next Obama.) Nevertheless, the American Dream is within reach for all those
who aspire to it and are willing to put in the hours; Adams was articulating it as an attainable outcome, not as a
pipe dream.
The American Dream was maturing into a shared dream, a societal compact that reached its apotheosis when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was sworn into office in 1933 and began implementing the New Deal. A “better and richer and fuller” life was no longer just what America promised its hardworking citizens individually; it was an ideal toward which these citizens were duty-bound to strive together. The Social Security Act of 1935 put this theory into practice. It mandated that workers and their employers contribute, via payroll taxes, to federally administered trust funds that paid out benefits to retirees—thereby introducing the idea of a “safe old age” with built-in protection from penury.

Still, the American Dream, in F.D.R.’s day, remained largely a set of deeply held ideals rather than a checklist of goals or entitlements. When Henry Luce published his famous essay “The American Century” in Life magazine in February 1941, he urged that the U.S. should no longer remain on the sidelines of World War II but use its might to promote this country’s “love of freedom, a feeling for the equality of opportunity, a tradition of self-reliance and independence, and also of cooperation.” Luce was essentially proposing that the American Dream—more or less as Adams had articulated it—serve as a global advertisement for our way of life, one to which non-democracies should be converted, whether by force or gentle coercion. (He was a missionary’s son.)

More soberly and less bombastically, Roosevelt, in his 1941 State of the Union address, prepared America for war by articulating the “four essential human freedoms” that the U.S. would be fighting for: “freedom of speech and expression”; “freedom of every person to worship God in his own way”; “freedom from want”; and “freedom from fear.” Like Luce, Roosevelt was upholding the American way as a model for other nations to follow—he suffixed each of these freedoms with the phrase “everywhere in the world”—but he presented the four freedoms not as the lofty principles of a benevolent super race but as the homespun, bedrock values of a good, hardworking, unextravagant people.
No one grasped this better than Norman Rockwell, who, stirred to action by Roosevelt’s speech, set to work on his famous “Four Freedoms” paintings: the one with the rough-hewn workman speaking his piece at a town meeting (Freedom of Speech); the one with the old lady praying in the pew (Freedom of Worship); the one with the Thanksgiving dinner (Freedom from Want); and the one with the young parents looking in on their sleeping children (Freedom from Fear). These paintings, first reproduced in The Saturday Evening Post in 1943, proved enormously popular, so much so that the original works were commandeered for a national tour that raised $133 million in U.S. war bonds, while the Office of War Information printed up four million poster copies for distribution.

Whatever your opinion of Rockwell (and I’m a fan), the resonance of the “Four Freedoms” paintings with wartime Americans offers tremendous insight into how U.S. citizens viewed their idealized selves. Freedom from Want, the most popular of all, is especially telling, for the scene it depicts is joyous but defiantly unostentatious. There is a happily gathered family, there are plain white curtains, there is a large turkey, there are some celery stalks in a dish, and there is a bowl of fruit, but there is not a hint of overabundance, overindulgence, elaborate table settings, ambitious seasonal centerpieces, or any other conventions of modern-day shelter-mag porn.

It was freedom from want, not freedom to want—a world away from the idea that the patriotic thing to do in tough times is go shopping. Though the germ of that idea would form shortly, not long after the war ended.

Nothing reinforced the seductive pull of the new, suburbanized American Dream more than the burgeoning medium of television, especially as its production nexus shifted from New York, where the grubby, schlubby shows The Honeymooners and The Phil Silvers Show were shot, to Southern California, where the sprightly, twinkly shows The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, Father Knows Best, and Leave It to Beaver were made. While the former shows are actually more enduringly watchable and funny, the latter were the foremost “family” sitcoms of the 1950s—and, as such, the aspirational touchstones of real American families.

The Nelsons (Ozzie and Harriet), the Andersons (Father Knows Best), and the Cleavers (Leave It to Beaver) lived in airy houses even nicer than those that Bill Levitt built. In fact, the Nelson home in Ozzie and Harriet was a faithful replica of the two-story Colonial in Hollywood where Ozzie, Harriet, David, and Ricky Nelson really lived when they weren’t filming their show. The Nelsons also offered, in David and especially the swoonsome, guitar-strumming Ricky, two attractive exemplars of that newly ascendant and clout-wielding American demographic, the teenager. “The postwar spread of American values would be spearheaded by the idea of the teenager,” writes Jon Savage somewhat ominously in Teenage, his history of youth culture. “This new type was pleasure-seeking, product-hungry, embodying the new global society where social inclusion was to be granted through purchasing power.”
Still, the American Dream was far from degenerating into the consumerist nightmare it would later become (or, more precisely, become mistaken for). What’s striking about the *Ozzie and Harriet*-style 50s dream is its relative modesty of scale. Yes, the TV and advertising portrayals of family life were antiseptic and too-too-perfect, but the dream homes, real and fictional, seem downright dowdy to modern eyes, with none of the “great room” pretensions and tricked-out kitchen islands that were to come.

Nevertheless, some social critics, such as the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, were already fretful. In his 1958 book *The Affluent Society*, a best-seller, Galbraith posited that America had reached an almost unsurpassable and unsustainable degree of mass affluence because the average family owned a home, one car, and one TV. In pursuing these goals, Galbraith said, Americans had lost a sense of their priorities, focusing on consumerism at the expense of public-sector needs like parks, schools, and infrastructure maintenance. At the same time, they had lost their parents’ Depression-era sense of thrift, blithely taking out personal loans or enrolling in installment plans to buy their cars and refrigerators.

While these concerns would prove prescient, Galbraith severely underestimated the potential for average U.S. household income and spending power to grow further. The very same year that *The Affluent Society* came out, Bank of America introduced the BankAmericard, the forerunner to Visa, today the most widely used credit card in the world.

What unfolded over the next generation was the greatest standard-of-living upgrade that this country had ever experienced: an economic sea change powered by the middle class’s newly sophisticated engagement in personal finance via credit cards, mutual funds, and discount brokerage houses—and its willingness to take on debt.

Consumer credit, which had already rocketed upward from $2.6 billion to $45 billion in the postwar period (1945 to 1960), shot up to $105 billion by 1970. “It was as if the entire middle class was betting that tomorrow would be better than today,” as the financial writer Joe Nocera put it in his 1994 book, *A Piece of the Action: How the Middle Class Joined the Money Class*. “Thus did Americans begin to spend money they didn’t yet have; thus did the unaffordable become affordable. And thus, it must be said, did the economy grow.”

Before it spiraled out of control, the “money revolution,” to use Nocera’s term for this great middle-class financial engagement, really did serve the American Dream. It helped make life “better and richer and fuller” for a broad swath of the populace in ways that our Depression-era forebears could only have imagined.

To be glib about it, the Brady family’s way of life was even sweeter than the Nelson family’s. *The Brady Bunch*, which debuted in 1969, in *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet’s* old Friday-night-at-eight slot on ABC, occupied the same space in the American psyche of the 70s as *Ozzie and Harriet* had in the 50s: as the middle class’s American Dream wish-fulfillment fantasy, again in a generically idyllic Southern California setting. But now there were two cars in the driveway. Now there were annual vacations at the Grand Canyon and an improbably caper-filled trip to Hawaii. (The average number of airplane trips per American household, less than one per year in 1954, was almost three per year in 1970.) And the house itself was snazzier—that open-plan living area just inside the Brady home’s entryway, with the “floating” staircase leading up to the bedrooms, was a major step forward in fake-nuclear-family living.

By 1970, for the first time, more than half of all U.S. families held at least one credit card. But usage was still relatively conservative: only 22 percent of cardholders carried a balance from one month’s bill to the next. Even in the so-called go-go 80s, this figure hovered in the 30s, compared to 56 percent today. But it was in the 80s that the American Dream began to take on hyperbolic connotations, to be conflated with extreme success: wealth, basically. The representative TV families, whether benignly genteel (the Huxtables on *The Cosby Show*) or soap-opera bonkers (the Carringtons on *Dynasty*), were undeniably *rich*. “Who says you can’t have it all?”
went the jingle in a ubiquitous beer commercial from the era, which only got more alarming as it went on to ask, “Who says you can’t have the world without losing your soul?”

A curious phenomenon took hold in the 1990s and 2000s. Even as the easy credit continued, and even as a sustained bull market cheered investors and papered over the coming mortgage and credit crises that we now face, Americans were losing faith in the American Dream—or whatever it was they believed the American Dream to be. A CNN poll taken in 2006 found that more than half of those surveyed, 54 percent, considered the American Dream unachievable—and CNN noted that the numbers were nearly the same in a 2003 poll it had conducted. Before that, in 1995, a Business Week/Harris poll found that two-thirds of those surveyed believed the American Dream had become harder to achieve in the past 10 years, and three-fourths believed that achieving the dream would be harder still in the upcoming 10 years.

To the writer Gregg Easterbrook, who at the beginning of this decade was a visiting fellow in economics at the Brookings Institution, this was all rather puzzling, because, by the definition of any prior American generation, the American Dream had been more fully realized by more people than ever before. While acknowledging that an obscene amount of America’s wealth was concentrated in the hands of a small group of ultra-rich, Easterbrook noted that “the bulk of the gains in living standards—the gains that really matter—have occurred below the plateau of wealth.”

By nearly every measurable indicator, Easterbrook pointed out in 2003, life for the average American had gotten better than it used to be. Per capita income, adjusted for inflation, had more than doubled since 1960. Almost 70 percent of Americans owned the places they lived in, versus under 20 percent a century earlier. Furthermore, U.S. citizens averaged 12.3 years of education, tops in the world and a length of time in school once reserved solely for the upper class.
James Truslow Adams’s words remind us that we’re still fortunate to live in a country that offers us such latitude in choosing how we go about our lives and work—even in this crapola economy. Still, we need to challenge some of the middle-class orthodoxies that have brought us to this point—not least the notion, widely promulgated throughout popular culture, that the middle class itself is a soul-suffocating dead end.

The middle class is a good place to be, and, optimally, where most Americans will spend their lives if they work hard and don’t over-extend themselves financially. On American Idol, Simon Cowell has done a great many youngsters a great service by telling them that they’re not going to Hollywood and that they should find some other line of work. The American Dream is not fundamentally about stardom or extreme success; in recalibrating our expectations of it, we need to appreciate that it is not an all-or-nothing deal—that it is not, as in hip-hop narratives and in Donald Trump’s brain, a stark choice between the penthouse and the streets.

And what about the outmoded proposition that each successive generation in the United States must live better than the one that preceded it? While this idea is still crucial to families struggling in poverty and to immigrants who’ve arrived here in search of a better life than that they left behind, it’s no longer applicable to an American middle class that lives more comfortably than any version that came before it. (Was this not one of the cautionary messages of the most thoughtful movie of 2008, WALL-E?) I’m no champion of downward mobility, but the time has come to consider the idea of simple continuity: the perpetuation of a contented, sustainable middle-class way of life, where the standard of living remains happily constant from one generation to the next.

This is not a matter of any generation’s having to “lower its sights,” to use President Obama’s words, nor is it a denial that some children of lower- and middle-class parents will, through talent and/or good fortune, strike it rich and bound precipitously into the upper class. Nor is it a moony, nostalgic wish for a return to the...
scrappy 30s or the suburban 50s, because any sentient person recognizes that there’s plenty about the good old
days that wasn’t so good: the original Social Security program pointedly excluded farmworkers and domestics
(i.e., poor rural laborers and minority women), and the original Levittown didn’t allow black people in.

But those eras do offer lessons in scale and self-control. The American Dream should require hard work,
but it should not require 80-hour workweeks and parents who never see their kids from across the dinner table.
The American Dream should entail a first-rate education for every child, but not an education that leaves no
extra time for the actual enjoyment of childhood. The American Dream should accommodate the goal of home
ownership, but without imposing a lifelong burden of unmeetable debt. Above all, the American Dream should
be embraced as the unique sense of possibility that this country gives its citizens—the decent chance, as Moss
Hart would say, to scale the walls and achieve what you wish.


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