

*I have always wondered about the “true” definition of the American Dream. What I learned is that there is no true definition, it is what you make out of it. Like every other young person in this country, I want to achieve my dream. I am learning that false hope for the future is better than no hope at all. Living realistically is important, but having dreams to keep me going every morning seems better if I want to live life to the fullest. While looking for the answer to “what is the American Dream?” I realized that the searching is part of my own American Dream. I do best when I go into the unknown without any expectations. My American Dream is taking risks for the future, rather than getting stuck on figuring out the “right” decision.*

A white picket fence, two and half kids, and a dog...sound familiar? When I think of the quintessential American Dream, a few words come to mind: prosperity, hope, and happiness. The American Dream has been changing for years and while society has grown in different ways, so have our aspirations and goals for the future. What creates these changes? How do we think about this dream today? It is safe to assume that everyone in the United States wants a better future for themselves and their children; this hope is deeply embedded in our culture. Hope is what drives this country forward and keeps us going towards the place we need to be. No matter how bad the Depression was, or how much higher student loans seem to get, the American Dream is the hope that remains strong. This history of optimism has shaped our morals. The American Dream is individualized. We are still living in a nation of opportunity and a place where we can be hopeful for the future. I am writing my own American Dream, a dream much different than any other person in this country.

The past was full of both economic downturn and success. When looking back, we see a country that went from economic security to sudden doubt. The economic security built a solid ground of patriotism and hope for the worry and doubt to stand on. We need to look back on the past versions of the American Dream in order to understand how it affects the future and today. A short history of American economics in the past hundred years shows mostly prosperity. When looking at a timeline of the American Dream, it coincides with what is happening in the economy. No matter what, this is a country that is hopeful for the future. The United States came out of dark and desperate times through optimism and the hope of achieving every citizen’s individual goals. Today, we look at the country and wonder whether this “hope” still exists.

The 1920’s were the beginning of a new American Dream and a new kind of prosperity. This is because it was the beginning of a new kind of wealth in The United States. It was the beginning of new technology causing a change in lifestyle (Ellis). While most Americans were not living in the prosperous new abundance, they were surrounded by it. It was new kinds of commodities that made living all the easier. African Americans started to work in factories and women were able to vote and be educated (Ellis). This was the creation of a hope for a better future, a future of grasping at more than what you had. On October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1929, the stock market crashed (Ellis). The stock market lost ninety percent of its value and even though only a tiny percentage of Americans owned stock, a quarter of Americans lost their jobs as a result (Ellis). Through this slump, most Americans were still hopeful, longing for a better life (Shapiro). It had been grounded in our culture to have an optimistic outlook (Shapiro). After the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt came up with The New Deal to bring money and government-funded social programs to people in need (Heist). This changed Americans’ relationship with the government; it became more of a friend to help people achieve their own dreams (Ellis). As The New Deal began, so did World War II. This created jobs and a jump-start to the failing economy

(Ellis). One of the new government plans was the GI Bill, which granted medical care, unemployment money, and college tuition to soldiers who had finished their duties (Ellis). This guaranteed soldiers a middle class life; this was a perfect American Dream in the making.

After World War II, there was a housing shortage for veterans (Gallagher) so the government offered mortgage loans to those who served, at an affordable price (Gallagher). They started building suburban neighborhoods for these new young families, the first being Levittown in New York in 1947 (Kilgannon). Four rooms and a bathroom at \$6,900 seemed perfect for a white middle class family (Kilgannon). The white middle class was the dominant group and had the most power at the time, so they were the ones who bought into the new housing developments. Home ownership went up to 64% (Heist). This wasn't just a jackpot for home retailers; families also needed goods to put in their homes, and thus began the era of mass consumption (Ellis). When you bought a house in Levittown, for example, you bought the lifestyle of the middle class white family (Ellis). Home ownership began to be a crucial part of our society, something that defined Americana (Levin). Another thing that defined American culture was an emphasis on making it better for the next generation, and helping your children to be better off than you (Levin). But this life was not available to non-whites, who were still living in a time of prejudice and unfair systems in our society (Ellis). It would not be years until African Americans living in this country would be allowed to move to the suburbs, let alone achieve their own dreams of being put on the same human level as whites (Ellis).

In the 50s and 60s, economically, the nation was prosperous (Ellis). However, while the economy was booming, gender and racial issues still made life imperfect (Ellis). The education system improved, and factories were booming, pumping out goods for a needy society (Ellis). Hope was what this country was thriving on, a hope for a better tomorrow. Americans suddenly changed. They were trying to settle down and start families. Their American Dreams had changed as well. The idea that every person could rise up and create a better life for him or herself in this country was prevalent—it was a promise that every person had their own individual dream that they could achieve, a new opportunity no one had seen before. The idea bloomed that American prosperity was possible, that every person's unique dream could come true, but this dream still went under the blanket of a suburban lifestyle. This idea came from the government's new start-up programs like social security and the GI bill. These programs were giving people different opportunities than they had ever had.

Then came the 80s, when Ronald Reagan was elected along with "Reaganomics" (Heist). Taxes were cut for rich, which developed a huge gap began between the rich and the poor as money circulated upwards (Heist). This was hampering what we thought was possible. The idea that this country was a nation of economic opportunity seemed to be fading.<sup>1</sup> The American Dream was in jeopardy because of this economic panic, panic that would continue for years to come.

In the United States today, the average student debt is \$27,000 (Levin). This is a huge debt to be paid off at a young age, hampering young people's American Dreams (Ludden). Even with an Ivy League education it is still difficult to find a job today (Shapiro). In addition, with rising cost of education, it is becoming less and less possible to own a house (Ludden). Another factor in what could be causing people's dreams to fall short is that the housing market is falling apart. This country is still living in a time of economic doubt and injustice. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is thought to be the age of real estate (Ellis). In the 90s, housing costs went through the roof

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<sup>1</sup> Since then this gap has continued to grow, and bad credit eventually created another economic recession (Heist).

(Heist). Home value kept climbing and bad loans were given, giving people a false sense of prosperity (Ellis). The bubble of unpaid mortgages burst and mass foreclosures began (Ellis). People with bad credit were given housing loans, causing 10 million families to lose their homes, bringing this country into a deep recession (Heist). While owning a house was once thought to be a symbol of having a “stake in society,” that principal is now changing (Levin). Even in suburban areas, people are moving. Between July of 2010 and July of 2011, densely packed urban areas grew faster than suburban ones, reversing a previous trend (Futrelle). What does the end of suburbia mean for the American Dream? It means it’s changing. We are moving towards a new, more individualized American Dream. The “white picket fence dream” does not apply to everyone anymore; there are other options and suburbia is no longer the only utopia.

Ninety-nine percent of Americans make less than \$250,000 a year (Heist). The future seems to be unknown, which is a scary thought. How the economy will change and if it will change in our favor is a game that Americans aren’t so ready to play. What seems to hold true through all of this is that this is a nation of idealism. No matter what, the future seems a little brighter than today. The housing market failing and the changes from suburban to more urban living shows a focus shift in the American Dream. It no longer leans on owning a house and starting a family, rather it is more based on achieving personal happiness. Looking at the numbers of homes lost and people in debt, you might think that people in this country have lost hope; well this just isn’t true. The dream of having a better life than your parents is still pervasive (Ludden). A better future is the goal of most American people—it always was and it seems it always will be. The dream of leading a good life hasn’t changed; people still look toward the future optimistically.

There is historical proof that optimism was one of the ways America survived some of its most tragic moments. This historical context is important when looking at today’s recession through a hopeful lens. Through a survey with credit.com, 78% of Americans asked said the American Dream was in reach (Levin). In the same survey, 1 in 4 Americans aged 18-25 said that being out of debt was the dream, not owning a home (Levin). With 3 million people in 2009 alone facing foreclosure (Smith), owning a home is no longer the dream: making your own choices and being hopeful for the future is. As debt piles up, there still seems to be this patriotic hope, the heartbeat that keeps the United States moving forward.

The new version of this American Dream is personal happiness, as well as knowing that you are going into uncertainty and embracing it (Shapiro). The new dream is about choices—choices of what jobs you can have, where you live, and how you make your own decisions. These choices make up a diverse country where every person has different aspirations than the person sitting next to them. No matter how bad things seem to get, hope is a force that empowers people and creates change. If this nation were not as prideful as we are, there would have been no point to an American Dream in the first place. The American Dream might shadow the reality of what this country faces; even so, extravagant dreamers are needed in order to inspire a better future. Every young person’s dream is going to be different than their parents’ or grandparents’; every generation has a new batch of dreamers with different desires and ambitions. My ambition, my desires, and my wishes are just as unique.

I look at myself and I wonder how I fit into this history. The “classic” American Dream of a better future certainly affects me but in a different way than it has been previously interpreted. Young people today are not thinking about the white picket fence, and the classic American Dream of settling down is coming to a close. Understanding this history is important in understanding where the dream is headed; it is headed in the direction of independence.

Americans have more opportunity than ever before to create their own life path. When I asked my parents what their American Dreams are, I was told that they want a better future for me. They also want to be a creative influence and make a positive mark on this planet. My father told me he wants to be able to be “reborn,” to know that he can go through life and get past his mistakes. My parents’ goals for the future affect mine in a huge way—they shape mine in understanding why I should even care about larger goals for the future.

Everyone’s dream is completely different because that’s the beauty of the dream itself. I do care about my own future and my kids’ future but I want to embrace that idea in a different way. *My* American Dream involves taking chances and living a life where I cannot anticipate what the next thing is going to be. It is achieving my goals of going to art school and being an art teacher, but also knowing full well that none of that could happen and my whole life could change in a second. I would rather die knowing that I have tried everything that is possible to be happy, rather than get stuck on what I am not doing right. Americans sometimes live in a world where they are ignorant to the actuality of their hopes and goals. As children, the idea of having a future of complete freedom is open to us. But that freedom seems to diminish as we grow older and reality and common-sense kick in, and we forget about our own childhood aspirations. If America is going to have a future, it needs those dreamers who will not second-guess personal happiness. My American Dream is going forward knowing that the future is scary and unknown, and embracing it anyway.

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