

A BETTER LIFE: CREATING THE AMERICAN DREAM

INTRODUCTION

The American dream is like a familiar old tune that we can all hum, but when we get to the lyrics no one can agree on all the words. We sing this national anthem in fragments. Ask 10 people about the American dream and you get 10 variations on a theme.

Nonetheless, the theme is fundamental. It's the belief that in the United States, people are free to pursue opportunity, and that through hard work, they can make a better life for themselves and their children.

This dream has powered the hopes and aspirations of Americans for generations. It's a dream that began as a plain but revolutionary notion: each person has the right to pursue happiness - not as self-indulgence, but as fair ambition and creative drive.

Over time however, that deceptively simple notion has yielded something else: a powerful set of consumer expectations. When Americans today talk about the American dream, they're often referring to a lifestyle that includes owning a house and a car, sending kids to college, and enjoying a comfortable retirement.

THE ROOTS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Centuries before the "American dream" became a standard phrase, immigrants and observers knew what it was. The ideals that undergird the American dream were formed early in the nation's history. Jim Cullen, author of *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, writes:

The Pilgrims may not have actually talked about the American dream, but they would have understood the idea: after all, they lived it as people who imagined a destiny for themselves. So did the Founding Fathers. So did illiterate immigrants who could not speak English but who intuitively expressed rhythms of the Dream with their hands and their hearts. What Alexis de Tocqueville called 'the charm of anticipated success' in his classic *Democracy in America* seemed palpable to him not only in the 1830s, but in his understanding of American history for two hundred years before that.

This expansive belief in possibility - "the charm of anticipated success" - is deeply embedded in the nation's psyche. It's a compelling message political leaders call on when the nation is in crisis, reminding Americans of their can-do spirit, that individuals have the power to bring about change.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that historian James Truslow Adams coined the phrase "American dream" during the depths of the Great Depression. A popular writer at the time, Adams wanted to write a history of the United States for the general reader, one that underscored what he saw as the nation's central historic theme: the American dream. In his book, *The Epic of America*, which was published in 1931, Adams describes that dream:

[It] is 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 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.

Adams was careful to say the American dream was not just a desire for affluence, but historian David Farber says the term quickly came to include it. The American dream "became closely linked to material comfort, to the consumer abundance America was producing. 'A better life' started to connote not just an economically secure life, but an abundant life. So there's a kind of linkage between mobility, a better life, and the good stuff that would make it so."