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Is There Still an American Dream?

Does the “American Dream” still exist is a topic that is frequently discussed in the news and media. The concept proposed by the media indicates that the American Dream has changed over time and may soon be eliminated. The media often portrays the millennial generation as a group of young people who do not have the opportunities to have jobs and work that will allow them to support themselves in a manner similar to their parents. The origin of the American Dream was shaped as early colonists left the despotic grasps of rulers on the European continent to seek a new life in America. Their ideals and dreams were captured in the Declaration of Independence when they declared “all men are created equal” and entitled to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

History gives a background on how the American Dream evolved. My readings on current media seem to indicate that this dream may have greatly changed from its original roots and is widely accepted today to mean that everyone should have the opportunity for material wealth. Further research is needed to look at how that history and diverse cultures have affected the American Dream. This topic is of special interest to me because I fit into this age group. I believe there is a question as to whether this dream is the same as it was for early Americans or

even my parents. This paper explores the question of whether this dream still exists for the millennial generation or for future generations.

Jon Meacham explored the idea of the American Dream in an article entitled “Keeping the Dream Alive.” Meacham appeals to the emotional aspect of this topic as he describes the crisis in America at the end of the Great Depression and World War II. He emphasizes how America was steeped in hard times and yet there was a hope for a better tomorrow. He uses quotes from James Truslow Adams, a popular historian, to express the idea that “that dream or hope has been present from the start” (26). Meacham suggests that naysayers may feel that there is no hope for the American Dream. He acknowledges their claims and credibility by looking at the social problems America has endured during the 90’s and early part this century. Meacham approaches the idea that there is still hope for the American Dream as he appeals to the American public and this generation to consider the fact that we as individuals must be willing to create a climate to make the American Dream come true. Instead of complaining that the dream is lost, he challenges us to make this possible. Ultimately Meacham asks us to look at the history of how this dream came about and reinstate the values that our ancestors instilled in America. Meacham’s argument is persuasive to me when I reflect on my ancestors who traveled across the plains to settle a small town in Utah. They didn’t have the opportunity for material wealth, but their legacy reflected the dreams they had of coming to America by establishing a community that was founded by hard work on their part. They didn’t wait for the government to give them a handout. Instead, they made their own American Dream a reality.

In contrast, Bob Herbert decries the ability of Americans to actually have the opportunity to create this type of dream as my ancestors were able to do. He points to the shortcomings of the modern government system and blames the government for some of the problems we now

face in America. In “Hiding from Reality”, he discusses how native-born workers lost 1.2 million jobs in 2009 (565). He questions how a person is able to enjoy a standard of living that will support their families and the American Dream when they are unable to secure employment. He questions the fact that we have such poor employment statistics and yet, we continue to raise taxes to support wars in foreign countries instead of taking care of our own citizens. He raises an emotional appeal to consider the plight of the children in America and suggests that they are being punished by the austerity measures state and federal governments are taking to try to balance the budgets. Herbert questions the idea that American families can have the opportunity to have the equal rights that the foundation of America was based on. This question raises the image of young American’s being left in a downtrodden society that can never reach the level of prosperity their parents enjoyed.

So where did the image of the ideal American family originate that gave each generation the hopes of having a better life than their parents did. This might easily be traced back to the conservative attitudes developed in the 1950’s. Tim Stanley explored this issue in “The Changing Face of the American Family.” He looked at how this dream was shaped around the conservative attitudes of the 50’s and then at the way the civil rights movement affected the way diverse populations looked at the American Dream. The author uses popular media from those times to discuss the influence they had on the perceptions of this dream.

As Stanley makes evident from his research, the 50’s was a stable time for most Americans after the traumatic years of WWI and WWII. He contends that statistics show in the early 1900’s the divorce rate in America had been the highest in the world, one in ten children grew up in single-parent homes, and over 35 percent of children lost a parent or sibling due to disease and death before the age of 20 (11). However, he paints a contrasting picture that

showed great change as soldiers returned from the war and America entered a new decade of conservative values. Stanley points out that “Leave it to Beaver” is “shorthand for the calm and luxury of American life before the storm of the 1960s” (11). June and Ward Cleaver presented the face of the perfect American family where dad went off to work every day and mom stayed home to cheerfully keep the home front running. Even when Walley and Beaver ran into problems, they were easily solved by calm, but firm parents. The purchasing power of Americans increased by 30 percent and advertising helped to create a high standard of living since it made people want “more things, better things, and newer things” (12). Life with the Cleavers presented a picture that continued to be shown while I was growing up of what the ideal family could achieve with the American Dream

Stanley again contrasts the 60’s as a decade with a huge swing that changed the face of the ideal life of the American family. Betty Friedan and the women’s liberation movement brought greater freedoms for women through the use of contraceptives which changed the sexual practices of Americans (14). Divorce rates doubled and children were again being born to single mothers. The nuclear family represented by the Cleavers was disintegrating. The civil rights movement brought about studies such as the Moynihan Report which suggested that poverty in the African-American ghetto was caused not by economics, but by the loss of family structure (14).

The 1980’s brought the “Cosby Show” to America and again the conservative idea of a nuclear family was brought forth by an African-American family. This was in sharp contrast to the idea that had been presented by many sitcoms in the 70’s that portrayed black characters as representing poverty and racism. Stanley discusses the fact that even though the ideal American family endured for only a short period of time in America, it was a myth that was turned in an

ideology and became synonymous with the American Dream (11). Growing up in the late 1980's and early 1990's made me still believe in the American Dream. I was unaware of the fact that there were others who had more material wealth than us and I could say that the myth of the ideal family became part of my own culture. Our family seemed to have a comfortable life and I really didn't notice that we were not rich. We owned a home and many of my friends lived in apartments and so I thought we were pretty well off. It wasn't until I was in high school that I began to realize that there were many others whose material wealth exceeded ours and I began to question what the opportunities might be for myself and the immediate peers I associated with.

My experiences during that period of time caused me to reflect on the question "Is the American Dream Over?" which is asked by Cal Thomas in his article on this topic. He faults Bob Herbert as being unwilling to face reality when he says that the dream is over, but contends that Herbert is not willing to actually look at where the blame lies for the loss of this dream. Thomas asserts that he knows who is responsible and is willing to place that blame squarely on the shoulders of the American government. He fully believes that the government is out of control and "thus out of touch robs every citizen, preventing fulfillment of the original American dream (569). Clearly, this thought causes some conflict in my own thinking about how much the government should be blamed and where our individual responsibility to making this dream come true lies.

Thomas explores the ideas that fundamental principles on how life should function in America have sustained the idea of the American Dream for 200 years. He argues that parents feel that their children should inherit a "better" life than they had, but he questions how we define the term "better". Rules have been taught in previous generations that define how to achieve the American dream. These rules include working hard, staying in school, avoiding

drugs, marrying and then having children, saving and investing for retirement, and living within one's means so that you do not become a burden on other taxpayers or relatives (570). Thomas questions if these rules are taught and supported by our present culture. He argues that anyone who thinks they can pursue their dreams with a dysfunctional government will be sadly disappointed by putting their faith in politicians. He seems to support the idea that the American dream is going to have to be saved by the individual citizen. I would content that these were the type of rules that were still being taught to my generation, but they seem to have eroded in the past years as the government has taken over more programs that tend to cause the individual to look for support instead of taking care of themselves.

This idea is explored in the article by Robert Borosage and Katrina Heuvel, "THE AMERICAN DREAM: Can a Movement Save It?" In 2011, activists gathered in Washington to participate in a Take Back the American Dream conference to promote the idea that citizens must take up the cause of saving the American Dream. This article asserts that our economy is not working for the American public due to the lack of full-time work, low wages, and high poverty levels. It discusses how conservatives rebelled against current policies and organized the Tea Parties to help create citizen protests. The ideas of the conservative movements discussed in this article are countered by descriptions of the various demonstrations from the left that supported the government. The article questions if the movements presented by these groups can actually change the despair that Americans are feeling about our current economy and the hopes that the American Dream can be salvaged.

Borosage and Heuvel point out that progress can only be accomplished by an enlightened president in cooperation with an energized people (15). This idea corresponds with ideas presented by Harvey J. Kaye in a recent interview on Moyers & Company about "What We Can Learn from FDR". Kaye reflects on the traumatic times when Franklin Delano Roosevelt went

to deliver the State of the Union address in 1941. Roosevelt knew the country was facing great trials, but he also believed in the strength of the people to rise to the occasion and overcome the difficulties that they were facing. His speech made it clear that as a nation everyone had to fight for the four freedoms: freedom from fear and want and freedom of speech and religion. Kaye emphasizes that Americans have not forgotten what the four freedoms are, but they may have “forgotten what it take to realize them”. Roosevelt mobilized the people by encouraging them to sustain and defend these freedoms. He helped the nation create work programs that brought dignity and pride to those who were suffering from lack of work. I support the ideas of these authors that as Americans we have become much more dependent on the government to support and take care of us. I am unsure if this is because of the lack of opportunities for Americans to lift themselves up or if it is because it is easier to let someone else take care of us. It certainly seems that we need to refocus our thinking and strive to support the ethics that established the idea that better might not always mean more material things, but rather the opportunity to sustain and support yourself in a comfortable lifestyle while still living within in your means. Maybe the American dream does not mean that you need to have a huge home with three cars in the garage, but instead you have adequate food, shelter, and the freedoms that entitle us to enjoy the pursuit of happiness.

I have concluded after reading these articles that there is a great debate about the state of the American economy and about the reality of the American Dream. History portrays the American Dream as the possibility of achieving a “better” world than that of previous generations. However, these articles bring to mind the question of what we consider “better” to be. Many of the naysayers would say that most Americans are only looking at material wealth and accumulation of things. They would assert that this idea is destroying the American Dream since it is impossible for the general public to accomplish these goals in our current economy. In contrast to those who question if the American Dream is dead, the hope for a revival of this

dream is strong in the minds of many Americans. They assert that the foundation for America was laid with principles that always encouraged Americans to improve their lifestyle and to make the lives of their fellow men better. There is a strong consensus that individuals can bring about a change that will ensure this dream for the millennial generation and future generations if we are willing to put in the same efforts and hard work that past generations encouraged. The question seems to be if we are willing to step up to this task and increase our participation in changing the path of the American Dream. Further research should look at the ways individuals in America can help to make changes by joining in movements that are willing to not only look at the problems with our economy, but in also providing viable and sustainable solutions to the issues we face in making sure the American Dream will survive for our generation and future generations.

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