

The American Dream Then and Now

1. Definition of the American Dream

Wikipedia:

The American Dream is a **national ethos of the United States of America** in which democratic ideals are perceived as a **promise of prosperity** for its people.

Freedictionary.com:

The notion that the American social, economic, and political system makes **success possible for every individual**.

Forbes Magazine has asked different American "great achievers" what they consider the American Dream to be:

Nancy Pelosi (First woman speaker of the House of Representatives, Dem.):

The American Dream is the **hope for a better future** with **equal opportunity for all** to participate in the prosperity and success of **our great nation**.

Dr. Condoleezza Rice (Former U.S. secretary of state, Rep.):

The American Dream is being dealt with and considered on your own merits. In America it doesn't matter where you came from; **it matters where you're going**.

Donald J. Trump (Real estate developer):

The American Dream is freedom, prosperity, peace--and liberty and justice for all. That's a big dream. It's not always easy to achieve, but that's the ideal. **More than any country in history we've made gains toward a democracy that is enviable throughout the world. Dreams require perseverance if they are to be realized, and fortunately we're a hard-working country and people. We are the luckiest people in history, just by the fact that we are Americans.**

Hugh M. Hefner (Editor-in-chief and chief creative officer of Playboy):

I think the American Dream is personal, political and economic freedom. It's what the Constitution assures, it's an immigrant dream, and a dream which we most identify with, largely in part because the idea has been promoted worldwide through movies and American pop culture.

Sasha Cohen (won both the U.S. figure skating national title and a silver medal at the Turino Olympics):

To me, the American Dream is something deep inside that drives you to be who you are. **It's a vision, a feeling, a calling--to be someone**, to do something, to command attention. [...] **I was driven and willing to work tirelessly to establish something**, be better than my competition, be a role model and have no regrets. [...] **I love that this is a country where you, and only you, can be whatever you believe.**

Aspects that connect all these definitions:

– Freedom

→ of choice, religion, press etc...

– Individualism

- The idea of the American founding fathers that everybody is equal and independent, and therefore also responsible for their own destiny

– Optimism, progress & prosperity

– Hard work

→ "from rags to riches"

– Patriotism

Video shown in class:

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C48aGtPluZo>)

2. American History

To understand the American Dream, it is necessary to review some landmarks of the American history:

1776:

The **Declaration of Independence** is the legal foundation of the American Dream. It states that "all men are created equal" and that every citizen has "a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness", so it reinforces the importance of equal opportunities, freedom and self-realisation.

1789:

The **Constitution** was established promoting the principles of a democratic government.

1791:

The **Bill of Rights** contains the first ten amendments to the Constitution and was introduced and promoted by James Madison

- 1st Freedom of religion, of speech, of the press, to assemble, and to petition
- 2nd Enumerates the right to keep and bear arms
- 4th Interdiction of unreasonable searches and seizures; search warrant is required to search persons or property
- 6th Rights to a fair and speedy public trial, to notice of accusations, to confront the accuser, to subpoenas, to counsel
- 7th Right to trial by jury in civil cases
- 8th No excessive bail or fines, or cruel and unusual punishment
- 10th Limits the powers of the federal government to only those specifically granted to it by the constitution.

1865:

Slavery is legally abolished at the end of the **Civil War**, under the presidency of Abraham Lincoln.

1869:

Women are allowed to vote in the state of Wyoming but not until 1920 do all states reinforce this law

1870:

Voting rights are extended to all adult males of all races.

1933:

After the **Great Depression** of the 1920s extreme poverty and inequalities have to be overcome somehow, so Franklin D. Roosevelt starts work creation programmes, direct relief to the unemployed part of the population and a national system of **social security**.

1964:

The years of **Martin Luther King's Civil Rights Movement**. Racial segregation in public places, schools, etc. and job discrimination are legally banned.

3. The American Dream today

- Critics see it as a clever political and economic marketing strategy
- There is a huge gap between the rich and the poor in America
- The role of state welfare is controversial (e.g. Obama's Health Care plans → freedom & being responsible for one's own destiny ← vs. → welfare state)
- Social aspects:
 - Concept of classless society has never become reality
 - The lower class sees America as a dog-eat-dog society
 - Middle class often works long hours and takes several jobs
 - The rich enjoy their benefits
- Ethnic groups:
 - Native Americans (2%) never fully adapted to the „white“ lifestyle
 - African-Americans (12%) has split into a small prosperous middle class and an impoverished underclass
 - Hispanic Americans (13%) largely consist of illegal immigrants and are often exploited as cheap workers
 - Asian-Americans (5%) are mainly made up of academically educated professional, who earn big money
- The vision of a „melting pot of nations“ has never become reality because new ethnic groups refused to be culturally absorbed by American society
- Concept of a „salad bowl“ was developed

4. Vocab on “American Dream”

freedom	chance	glory
democracy	future	government
economic success	barrier	happiness
right	to reach	heritage
opportunities	fulfillment	immigration
unlimited	failure	multiculturalism
to abolish	border	pastoral
american nightmare	reality	patriotism
material plenty	physical comfort	pioneer
social order	destiny	pride
circumstances	competition	privilege
fortune	humanity	progress
selfishness	civilization	promise
to contest capable	decision	protest
class/rank	desolation	race
liberty	isolation	religion
cheap amusement	dishwasher	savage
independence	discrimination	segregation
curse	disorientation	skin colour
individualism	election	slavery
poverty	enemy	society
success	equality	to accept
racism		

5. Mindmap: links on “American Dream”

<http://mindomo.com/view.htm?m=107376d7fbc94df788b01869f442103a>

6. The American Dream in the Abi:

2007: LK – Thema 1 (Third task → comparison of a given text to the AD)

2007: LK – Thema 2 (Newspaper article on the AD)

2009: LK – Thema 1 (Poem about the AD, *dealt with in class*)