

1

The Pursuit of the American Dream

Historically, to be successful in this country meant that one could attain the American Dream. Though different models of success could be delineated by the late nineteenth century, success in America has usually meant making money and translating it into fame and status. But success meant not just being wealthy but achieving wealth and advancing beyond one's father in terms of occupation and income. It also meant continued advancement during one's working years and having a better job and more income at the end of one's career than at the beginning. America promised social mobility, and bettering oneself meant that one had to utilize money to gain increased social status. Those with discretionary income could use money as a social symbol for promoting mobility. These trends can be understood by exploring the emergence and development of the success ethic.

Growth of the Success Ethic

Puritanism and the Protestant ethic encouraged humans to be productive, to work hard, and to advance materially. Max Weber argued that the development of European capitalism could not be accounted for in strictly economic or technical terms but was largely the result of the ascetic secular morality associated with the emphasis in Calvinistic theology on predestination and salvation.¹ Since salvation is the focus of religious life, people are interested in knowing whether they are

among the chosen. Success in one's worldly calling is believed to be an almost infallible indication.

The Protestant ethic, according to Weber, regarded all work as a justified "calling" and, by treating persons in an individualistic and impersonal way, facilitated rational modes of behavior that allowed capitalistic enterprises to flourish. The maxims of action directed the believer to behave in the spirit of mature capitalism. By the term "the spirit of capitalism," Weber meant a set of attitudes and the belief that it is a good thing to make money even beyond the necessities, that one should maximize wealth without much consideration for the means as long as the means are efficacious. This, in turn, sanctioned competition and other business practices.

The elements in the Protestant ethic congruent with the capitalistic spirit are asceticism, a this-worldly orientation, and a compulsion to lead a well-ordered, systematic, impersonal, and individualistic life. Finally, Weber argued that capitalism, resting largely on hedonistic and material incentives, no longer needs the support of the Protestant ethic. The pursuit of wealth has become stripped of its religious and ethical meaning.²

Another salient influence on the success ethic was the ideal of continuous progress that grew out of the Enlightenment faith that through the use of "Reason" in all aspects of life, superstition, myth, dogma and all the shackles on the human mind would soon fall away, and the highest stage in human history would be ushered in. This same faith, although at times less connected with the use of reason and science, was found in nineteenth-century America in the drive of intrepid settlers to conquer a new frontier and tame a wilderness. America, many believed, was the land of opportunity, of vast untapped resources and unlimited possibilities for personal advancement, where even the most impoverished immigrant could hope to rise from his socioeconomic level.

American capitalism began with merchant capitalism based on the activities of businessmen who made profits through trade and commercial activity. As industrialization proceeded, it became based more upon an industrial capitalism in which businessmen made profits from manufacturing and production. Many inventions augmented the development of capitalism. British inventors in the eighteenth century created machines for the production of textiles, and these inventions found their way to America; the telegraph provided a communication link across the continent; and the use of Bessemer and open-hearth processes revolutionized steel production. Perhaps the most important of these inventions was the

improvement of transportation by the steamboat and the building of a great network of canals, later to be followed by the railroads, eventually linking the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

While the flood of immigrants between 1870 and 1910 provided a source of cheap, unskilled manpower for the ambitious capitalist, the schools were attempting to assimilate children into the dominant ethos of American culture. As industrial processes grew in complexity, the growth of bureaucratic organizations ensued, along with the need for a managerial class. In light of these changes, an expansion of secondary education was needed. The *Kalamazoo* case (1874) led to publicly supported high schools, and compulsory education laws were enacted, beginning in Massachusetts in 1852, and ending in Mississippi in 1918. Still, large numbers did not receive many years of formal schooling until the laws, after the turn of the century, were more firmly enforced, and until the passage of child labor laws.

In addition to its emphasis on the Protestant ethic, the industrial age recognized Social Darwinism, which held that social life was analogous to the human organism in its struggles with nature; hence, only those most fit will survive. Importance was placed on accumulating wealth however one could (which was accorded religious sanction through Calvinistic doctrine), production of goods, accumulating quantities of goods in the face of scarcity, and preparing oneself vocationally in order to compete successfully. With the expansion of the high school, on-the-job apprenticeship training shifted more to the schools, by instituting trade and industrial training.

Out of these dramatic technological and ideological changes came what Andrew Carnegie called "the gospel of wealth." This system of beliefs promoted a laissez-faire attitude toward the economy. At this time, the federal government did not regulate industry, except for tariff policies, and the states imposed few regulations. The gospel of wealth was built on the belief that government exists largely for defending property rights. The corollary to property rights was the acquisition of wealth by industry and thrift. Thus, the foundation of capitalist society consisted of individualism, private property, the accumulation of wealth, and competition.

The gospel of wealth became a formula that allowed Protestantism after the Civil War to reconcile its teachings with popular materialism. Sensitive to changing mores, Protestant leaders adapted to these developments in order for the church to retain a significant function. But with the growing prestige of science in modern thought, the formulas of the gospel of wealth were expressed increasingly in secular language.

The gospel of wealth retained the Christian concept of the individual as a moral agent. It emphasized freedom of action in the economic sphere and “rugged individualism.” The control of the economy should be in terms of a natural aristocracy to be determined by the competitive struggle of the market, which eliminates the weak and incompetent and chooses those with initiative, vision, judgment, and organizing ability. As a result of these principles, industries became economic autocracies.

The government’s functions were limited to maintaining order and protecting property. A more intrusive state is dangerous, it was argued, because political democracy does not place able men in power; politics fosters mediocrity. It was therefore important that a natural aristocracy of talent be arrayed against it.

How to account for poverty? It springs, according to this ideology, from laziness, vice, lack of thrift, and sometimes misfortune. Poverty is as inevitable as sin and is largely the result of it. The poor man should be given aid and charity, have his sins pointed out to him, and then be converted to Christianity. The gospel of wealth assumed that the poor would accept the leadership of the natural aristocracy. It overlooked possibilities for political action and the rise of labor unions.³

Rise of the American Dream

The ideal of success is found in the American Dream, which is probably the most potent ideology in American life. The ideas behind it were evident in the nineteenth century, but it was not formulated and designated as such until 1931, by James Truslow Adams. He spoke of

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. . . . It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a 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.⁴

Adams insisted that the American Dream had lured tens of millions to the nation’s shores in the past century, to aspire not only for mate-

rial plenty but to be able to grow to their fullest development unhampered by older civilizations and their social-class barriers. The Dream was not the product of a solitary thinker but evolved from the hearts and burdened souls of millions who came here from other nations. To make the Dream come true, he added, we must work together, no longer merely to build bigger, but to build better.⁵

Today, the American Dream has been formulated in terms of certain basic values and character traits. Americans generally believe in achievement, success, and materialism. This combination of values, in conjunction with equal opportunity, ambitiousness, and hard work and the means of attaining it, could be considered the American Dream. Among the core beliefs underlying the ideology is to work hard in order to succeed in competition; those who work hard gain success and are rewarded with fame, power, money, and property; since there is equal opportunity, it is claimed, those who fail are guilty of either insufficient effort or character deficiencies.⁶

A 1987 Roper survey of a nationwide cross section of 1,506 adults, with supplemental interviews among 148 black adults, found that Americans have distinct ideas about the American Dream; but when asked to name the individual that best exemplifies it, no one person stood out; in fact, 35 percent said they did not know. Family members, however, were cited most often (11 percent). Beyond family, Americans named John F. Kennedy (8 percent) and Abraham Lincoln (6 percent) most frequently, followed by Martin Luther King, Jr. (4 percent), Ronald Reagan (4 percent), and Lee Iacocca (4 percent).⁷

But lately the American Dream has been shrouded by doubt and pessimism as the economy falters and opportunities diminish. This is not a new development. The Dream in the 1930s became a record of unfulfilled promises and dashed hopes, characterized by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* as illusion and tragedy. But the prosperity of the 1950s, a period of America's preeminence as a military and economic power, revived the Dream.

The American Dream in the 1990s is clouded and at a crossroads. Some perceive that the Dream is at stake, as reflected in public education and the rhetoric of equality of opportunity in current national reports on education. At risk in the decline of American schools is our leadership in technology and production, our economic prosperity, the loss of military security abroad, and the disintegration of civil and social order at home.⁸ Others, in viewing the concept of equality of opportunity, find it to be equivocal, serving the interests of the powerful while placating the powerless. Thus, education can be equitable in

offering beginnings to diverse individuals only if just principles first govern society.⁹

William Proefiedt notes two types of inequalities: per-pupil expenditures; and family income, which predicts school and career success. Yet some point out that efforts to create equality of conditions would abrogate individual freedom and destroy the connection between effort and reward so central to the American Dream. Schools should not reflect through financing, geography, tracking, and curricular structures the inequalities of the larger society. Proefiedt believes that the success ethic, on both an individual and national level, functions as a substitute for moral purpose in the schools.¹⁰

Vocational education has been an extension of the American Dream of getting ahead by hard work; it promises equality of opportunity and material success. Americans generally support vocational education despite research indicating that job placement and wage rates are not as high as once thought. As rigidity replaces innovation, programs become increasingly separate from the larger educational enterprise, and narrow skill training is substituted for general education among students who can least afford to be ill-prepared.¹¹

Stephen Baldwin states that the American Dream includes adequate housing, education for one's children, and a secure retirement. Recent data indicate that achieving the Dream and succeeding in the labor market have become more difficult due to sluggish productivity growth, increased competition from abroad, technological change, and shifts in attitudes and expectations about roles of minorities and women.¹²

A special issue of *Fortune* magazine on "fixing" the economy claims that the United States needs a new economic agenda and politicians who face reality. The editors identify a host of areas that are deficient: productivity, jobs, trade, R&D, and taxes, as well as the budget, health care, infrastructure, regulation, and the environment.¹³

Of especial concern today is the decline of America's competitiveness internationally. A critical area is that of technology. Successful competition in technology requires managers with technological understanding; business traditions and financial incentives that encourage long-term investments; a well-educated work force; committed engineers and scientists; and institutions engaged in research and development.¹⁴ America is paying an enormous price to boost its competitive position. Much of it has been initiated with borrowed funds, by selling off assets and laying off employees, or freezing workers' salaries. Worker output in Japan grew during the 1980s three times faster than in the United States.¹⁵ "The past two decades is the greatest crisis of Amer-

ican industry by far,” asserts business historian Alfred Chandler, Jr.¹⁶ Industry had to restructure because of overdiversification and, while restructuring, “the competition was getting tougher.” Germans and Europeans and Japanese would have given U.S. industry competition earlier if World War II had not intervened. Chandler observes that “It first hit us in the 1960s and our response was very poor.”¹⁷ What Americans must do, according to one report, is to “lift investments, bolster the competitiveness of small manufacturers and service companies, strengthen U.S. technology, and increase workers’ skill at applying it.”¹⁸

Kevin Phillips reports on the enormous concentration of wealth in the United States during the 1980s — most of it in the hands of the top one percent of the population.¹⁹ He shows that the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century and the 1920s were two other periods when Republican policy managed to concentrate vast wealth in the hands of a favored few. The top one percent of Americans during the 1980s increased their share of income by \$100 billion to \$150 billion a year. Thus, the 1980s “produced one of U.S. history’s most striking concentrations of wealth even as the American dream was beginning to crumble not just in inner-city ghettos and farm townships but in blue-collar centers and even middle-class suburbs.”²⁰

Progress for women has been mixed. Though women have made progress in entering formerly all-male occupations, the infamous “glass ceiling” for women is not breaking; only three out of one thousand chief executive officers of the leading U.S. corporations are women.²¹

Though minorities have made some progress in the past generation, for many of them the American Dream is an unattainable ideal. Today the health of blacks in general has improved, more blacks are completing college, blacks are moving into better jobs, and more blacks are being elected to office. On the downside, the average income for blacks is 57 percent of whites’ incomes, blacks are more likely than whites to use hard drugs, and 47 percent of the prison population is black, even though blacks constitute only 12 percent of the population.²²

This situation is generally similar for Hispanic Americans. A study of the National Council of La Raza found that the majority of the nation’s 20.1 million Hispanics made no significant economic gains in the 1980s. U.S. census data from 1979 to 1989 showed that nearly 27 percent of all Hispanic Americans lived in poverty in 1989, up from 25.7 percent in 1979. In comparison, about 31 percent of blacks and 10 percent of whites live in poverty.²³ However, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that poverty among non-Hispanic

whites has increased at a faster pace than it has for minorities. The number of impoverished whites increased 14 percent between 1989 and 1991.²⁴

With unemployment 7.5 percent and higher nationwide during the recession of the early 1990s, and with not only blue-collar but middle-management persons seeking jobs and some job markets closed for the future, the common aspiration of advancing socioeconomically beyond one's parents is increasingly unrealistic for more and more youth. According to "The State of Working America," an analysis of U.S. economic trends issued by the Economic Policy Institute, younger workers have found in the last decade that the American Dream is fading for their generation.²⁵ Some have renounced their erstwhile dreams and are reluctantly resigned to lower living standards; others displace the American Dream by vicariously pursuing it through their sports heroes and other media personalities; and still others have become involved in crime.

Some people see specific threats to the American Dream. The Roper survey gave respondents a list of seventeen items and asked them to assess whether each item poses a severe threat, somewhat of a threat, or no threat at all to the American Dream. Those problems listed by a majority as posing a severe threat are illegal drugs (79 percent), crime (69 percent), diminishing quality of the education system (66 percent), deteriorating environment (57 percent), and federal deficits (57 percent).²⁶

Some significant aspects of the American Dream, moreover, are no longer available to pursue. In American history, according to Robert Heilman, the Dream in action has been migration: from Europe to America, from society-at-large to utopian communities, and from the East Coast to various Wests. But the frontier has disappeared after being available to the Western world for half a millennium. The frontier — which by its existence seemed to legitimize all dreams — means space, space implies time, and time a future in which dreams can be realized. When horizontal mobility is closed, vertical mobility is substituted: instead of going to a new world of higher quality, one moves higher into the world as it is.²⁷

But while a geographical frontier is no longer available, it could be argued that vast new "frontiers" are open through discoveries in sciences and technology, exploration of the solar system and the oceans, conquering of diseases and epidemics, new inventions, and creating new and imaginative forms in the arts. As for the economy, the 1920s, 1950s, and mid-1980s were periods of optimism about economic

conditions and the American Dream. When the economy begins growing rapidly and jobs are more plentiful, some Americans will regain their buoyancy and optimism and rekindle their belief in the American Dream.

The Dream may be revitalized by great exemplars. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his memorable “I Have a Dream” speech, sought “to hew out of that mountain of despair a stone of hope”:

I still have a dream. It is a dream rooted in the American Dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.”²⁸

David McCullough, author of the best-selling biography of former president Harry S. Truman,²⁹ concludes that Truman had his faults, both as a president and as a human being — but Truman knew who he was. “He’s the ordinary fellow who achieves the extraordinary, again and again, all through life. And the reason I think we like [the Truman story] so much is that it’s our story. We are the country of seemingly ordinary people who — with our freedom and opportunities — are going to do something extraordinary. That’s the great story. That’s the American Dream.”³⁰

Postscript

In *The Good Society* (1991), Robert Bellah and associates discuss the critical need to move beyond those persistent “distractions” that are entailed in the very idea of success in American life. Money, status, political influence, and social mobility all seem to have taken on an exclusive evaluative power of their own in a society rife with poverty and hopelessness. Are these so-called endowments the “proper measures of a good society”? Does the head-long pursuit of success drain our attention away from those we continue to neglect, and thereby constrict possibilities for everyone (including those who govern and thrive) in the long run?³¹

Similarly, it would seem that any notion of success played out in the unknowing fashion of Ayn Rand’s egoistic protagonist, Howard Roark, in *The Fountainhead*, represses its own hollow prospects for the future: “I come here to say that I do not recognize anyone’s right to one minute of my life. Nor to any part of my energy. Nor to an

achievement of mine. . . . I come here to say that I am a man who does not exist for others.”³² Can we, as a nation and community, muster enough energy and imagination to bypass Roark’s tragically self-contained, and thus pathetically limiting, cultural scaffolding?