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The American Dream Is Alive in the Minds of Young Americans

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Other presentations in this volume have discussed important features of American exceptionalism from economic, historical, legal, and policy perspectives. I have no expertise in those fields, and I have learned a great deal from the authors of presentations that draw on them.

My own field of study is psychology. As a psychologist, I am interested in people's beliefs and in how their beliefs influence the choices that shape their lives. From my perspective as a psychologist, the emblematic symbol of American exceptionalism is a belief in what has been called "the American dream." This is a belief that has fostered hope, accomplishment, and success for generations of Americans, and it has been an aspirational goal for millions of young people throughout history.

Where did the idea of the American dream come from? The general notion most likely evolved early in our nation's history, as legions of Americans became aware of the freedoms and opportunities that had

made their own advancement possible. But the actual term itself was coined by historian James Truslow Adams in a 1931 book called *The Epic of America*. The way Adams defined it, the American dream is "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer for everyone, with opportunities for each according to ability and achievement. . . . It is not a dream of high wages or motorcars merely. It is a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature."

What is notable in Adams's definition is that the American dream is not an entitlement, something that you are given, something you're guaranteed, but it's an opportunity that you have. Ability and achievement are determining factors. Adams also points out that material success is one important part of the American dream but not the only part. He put the word "merely" after "high wages" and "motorcars" because, yes, material aspiration is a healthy ambition, but it takes its place among broader aspects of attainment, including social and spiritual attainment, in a social order that allows people to reach their "fullest stature" in every sense. Conceived in this way, the American dream stands as one of the truly noble—and exceptional—standards of world history.

Yet a surprising bit of information that I'll mention is that the American dream is far from an accepted notion in our country today. There is a widespread view that the American dream is a myth or that it is dying. In fact, if you google the phrase "*death* of the American dream," you will get somewhere around thirty-four million hits. Now I'm not implying that each hit is unique, and the Google algorithm doesn't exactly produce reliable data. But I do think that this is a fair indicator that there is a lot of skepticism these days about the reality and viability of the American dream. This skepticism is prevalent in media, books, articles, in what academics write in journals, and in what leading social commentators are writing. It is clear from all these sources—all of which are picked up by the Google search—that the idea of the American dream is not in high repute in our public discourse at the present time.

For example, one distinguished professor has written that the American dream is "the dream that this country is a place where anybody who builds a better mousetrap can get rich."[1] This is a sardonic comment about one component of the American dream, and it ignores its more evocative components, such as the promise of living a fulfilling life by freely following the voice of one's own conscience. Others who have recently written about the American dream go even further toward a materialistic reduction by linking it to specific consumer attainments, such as home ownership and the two-car garage.[2]

When critics ground their views in a wholly material interpretation of the American dream, they dismiss its authenticity. One popular book along these lines bears the subtitle *The Futile Pursuit of the American Dream*—a characterization largely in keeping with the consensus of critical intellectual thinking on the matter.[3] Such views reduce the elevated notion that Adams formulated into trivial terms that express cynicism in the way these writers have phrased them. In such views, which influence the media and account for the millions of Google hits I noted, the American dream has been diminished to no more than an idea of gaining celebrity and getting rich quick.

The question that I will explore here is, what do young people in our country believe about the American dream? Do their beliefs reflect the cynicism present in our public discourse, or do they match the more elevated vision described by James Truslow Adams?

The research institution at Stanford that I direct, the Stanford Center on Adolescence, examines how people acquire and develop their beliefs. Our center's primary interest in recent years has been how people find their purposes in life. Ours is a small research center that focuses mainly on younger people; but in the special case of purpose, we have looked at many ages, even as late as retirement age (in collaboration with the nonprofit group Encore.org and the Stanford Distinguished Careers Institute recently launched by former Stanford School of Medicine dean Dr. Philip Pizzo). In our research with young people in the adolescent

and young adult age groups, our particular interest has been in how they find the purposes that will direct their lives in the future. What motivates these young people? What do they find meaningful? What leads them to strive, to achieve, to become the kinds of people that they most want to become? We examine many areas of young people's lives. We are interested in academic motivation, the motivation to acquire a fulfilling career, the motivation to build a family life, and the motivation to contribute positively to their communities.

Our center's research director, Heather Malin, working with several of our graduate student research assistants, conducted a study a few years ago to explore the question of what American citizenship means to the young people in our country. In this study, Dr. Malin and her research team interviewed young people about what it means to be an American these days. I'll quote from these interviews, letting the voices of the young people speak for themselves. I'll also identify in the quotes some themes that I would like to point out about how the American dream is viewed by young Americans today—the hopes and beliefs that were typical in the population of young people that Dr. Malin and her research team spoke with. These themes were typical of the sample as a whole. I haven't selected unusual types of quotes. My overall conclusion is that, for a great many young people today, the American dream is alive and well.

"I hear 'American dream,' and I think the chance to pursue your dreams, the daring to be whoever you want to be. . . . Well, I guess it inspires me."

In talking about the meaning of the American dream, this girl highlights the idea of having a *chance*. We will see that a lot in these quotes. This girl says very directly, "It inspires me." These young people don't all use the exact term "inspire," but you will hear a sense of inspiration in all of the quotes.

"To me, personally, it's really the right to live a life the way you want to live, the right to prosper. It's basically . . . having a chance to start a life,

start a living, raise a family, do whatever you want as long as it's under the law. I think it's really meaningful, and that's another reason why I love this country."

Again, the American dream is not a trivial concept to these young folks. It's meaningful. It inspires them.

"The American dream is just basically the chance to succeed, the promise and the hope of something better being out there . . . a road that will lead me to a better step. Not necessarily even more money, because money's not a huge deciding factor in my career choice, but it's kind of more like the pursuit of happiness."

Note that this boy says "the chance to succeed," "the promise and hope of something better being out there." None of these young people are speaking of a guarantee, of some sort of *entitlement* to succeed. We don't see that in these interviews. We see a focus on *opportunity,* an appreciation of having a shot at success. This boy said something that also runs throughout the interviews: it's "not necessarily even more money." Now, of course, the American dream has a large material aspect to it; and many of these young people recognize that material success is important, but a lot of them emphasized that this is not the only thing. That's a point that I'm going to return to later.

"It's a chance of pursuit of happiness."

That sounds a bit like the Declaration of Independence.

"Nevertheless, despite the problems, there's still a lot of opportunity out there."

This boy also talked about freedom and having a voice in government and, again, opportunities. He mentions some problems in the country. Not all of these young people were uncritical about every aspect of our country, but they usually returned to the idea that their perceptions of these problems do not defuse the opportunity that they see.

"The American dream is the ability through hard work and determination to rise. It is the right to be given the opportunities to do as you will. It is

the right to choose for yourself, and that's what I feel the American dream is. . . . I think it plays a role mainly in values, but also in the way I act and the way I plan to act."

This boy is determined to take advantage of the opportunity this country offers "through hard work and determination," the need for which is a realization that many young people have, despite views to the contrary. That actually surprised me a bit because we may not often think of young people as fully endorsing the fact you have to work hard to deserve things and that life can be tough. But we saw this recognition throughout the interviews. The boy I quoted talked about values and "the way I act and the way I plan to act," which seems very impressive for an adolescent. In a follow-up interview, he said,

"It definitely means something. I'm just trying to figure out how best [to] define it because it means, in the end, so much. I think the American dream is the freedom to do as you will, and the ability to be rewarded for your work, to have a fair chance at success, whatever it means to you."

That quote shows that the boy was still grasping at this idea and trying to figure it out and decide what it means to his life. In this way, the American dream can be a formative notion. It can be something that has influence on the direction of development of young people.

"I'm very fond of the American dream. The American dream to me pretty much means freedom. It means that it doesn't matter how wild your aspirations are; the American dream is to succeed in everything you've wanted to succeed in. If my dream is to become an astronaut, I'll become an astronaut."

That quote came from an eighteen-year-old with vaulting ambitions. When he says he is "very fond of the American dream," it means to him the freedom to aim high. It means aspirations that he mentions are "wild ones": becoming an astronaut, for example. It's about being able to choose what to do with one's life. He goes on to say,

"So the American dream to me, that aspiration . . . keeps me motivated, because it's not something where I'm going to get it handed to me. It's not

something that I'm going to receive by just sitting. It's something that I have to work for."

As I said earlier, the primary interest at our Center is what motivates young people to develop, to thrive, to succeed, and to strive, and this boy strongly associates the American dream with striving.

"The American dream to me personally is, to sum it up in one word, opportunity. *Just to have the opportunity to be successful and to be happy in whatever way it makes you happy. . . . Everybody has their own little American dream. So just to look at my parents and see that they're still trying to live their American dream, still trying to provide for my siblings, it kind of hits me, [be]cause I kind of want the same things for my future family."*

This boy talked about opportunity; the American dream means something to this boy and to his parents as well.

"[The American dream is] being able to be really poor and be able to, based on your own hard work, come up through the ranks. Being able to vote, exercise your rights, be able to say whatever you want and protest, have freedom to do your own religion, yes."

This girl mentions religion. This was another common theme. A lot of the young people talk about freedoms of speech and religion as essential features of the American dream.

"Those ideals definitely are an important part of my life. Freedom, because I feel like sometimes I may not have opinions that are popular with the majority, or have opinions that might ruffle some people's feathers. . . . It also helps me to feel like if I have the freedom to change . . . if we have the freedom to think differently, then we have the freedom to change."

This statement is especially interesting because this boy talks about the freedom to change himself, to grow in the way he wants to grow. Nobody's telling him what he must be in life—he can determine this for himself, according to the best guidance from his own conscience. Here's another boy speaking about freedom.

"I think the American dream is that people can be who they are. Like

freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of action and stuff. I believe in that. People can be who they want to be."

Finally there was a theme across some of the interviews about being able to live in peace, similar to James Truslow Adams's ideas of having a social order that you can trust. One boy put it this way:

"The way I see the American dream is being able to live in peace, meaning you don't have to worry. . . . It's not being rich, it's not being rolling in money. . . . It's like the land of the free, so you basically have opportunities and open doors for a better life."

In the following quote, a girl talks about security, safety, equal opportunity, equal rights, and how her parents succeeded through hard work.

"They go through all the struggle, so that their children have a better life. . . . They have an equal opportunity and equal rights, but not equality in everything. Equal opportunity. They have to work . . . but equal opportunity to pursue what they want. And security and safety. That'd be the American dream. . . . We're given that freedom to have all these dreams and these goals. . . . So in a way it's important to me just because it's not something we should take for granted."

The girl's statement that "it's not something we should take for granted" has special resonance for me. I will say that the sense of gratitude among virtually all of the young people I have quoted is very moving. I am a believer in gratitude as a virtue that promotes everything in life related to learning, open-mindedness, an appreciation for what you're receiving—including education; I always promote the idea of encouraging gratitude for schooling. Students who see schooling as a gift they are being offered, rather than as a burden put upon them, have a great advantage when it comes to motivation to learn. And any teacher will tell you that the key that unlocks the doors to learning is motivation.

The quotes that I have presented here suggest that when young Americans think about the meaning of the American dream, what they say is

more in line with the elevated vision that James Truslow Adams formulated than with the degraded view promulgated in much of today's intellectual discourse and public media. I doubt that many young Americans have ever read Adams's formulation, but their views reflect a similar hopeful faith. Youth, of course, is a time of high idealism. This faith and idealism lends to a certain pride in the American tradition. Later in the interview, when we asked the question "Are you proud to be an American?" we saw very much the same sense of why America is exceptional. For example, one girl said,

"We have the freedom to believe whatever we want. . . . We're blessed to have the opportunity to become anything we desire to be. That's a great advantage that we have in this country."

Again, we see gratitude arising from appreciation of America's exceptional promise.

It is noteworthy that pride, gratitude, and belief in the American dream among so many young Americans seem to be flourishing in the face of contrary media messages. Young people also confront similar contrary messages in some educational settings. Here is a quote from a high school senior from a study that we did some years ago:

"Last year the history teacher told us that the American dream was dead. I didn't believe that at all. The whole class was just sort of silent, and he could tell that we didn't really agree with that. If we didn't dream, then we wouldn't be doing anything. We wouldn't be advancing as a society."

This eighteen-year-old boy had a finer understanding of the American dream than his teacher; from what we can infer from his statement, so did his entire class. I worry what may happen to these eighteen-year-olds if they enter college and become exposed to even stronger negative opinions of the kind expressed by that high school teacher. Still, if the reaction of this boy's class is any indication, young Americans are not easily disabused of their hopes and dreams. One thing seems clear to me from the interviews I have quoted here: we have a large population of

young people in this country who are full of optimism and high aspirations and who are grateful for the opportunities that our country offers them.

I'm going to close with one more bit of data. In our studies of purpose, we asked, "What's the very most important purpose that you have or that you see in your life?" The most common source of purpose that young people talk about is wanting to have a family and to support their families. Following right after that is work. Many want to have a great career. They want to learn a lot to build their prospects. For a smaller but stable portion of the youth population, their most important purpose is to devote themselves to their faith and serve God. These are all fine purposes. But only a very few of the young people we interviewed expressed aspirations to serve as a civic leader of some kind—city council member, school board member, town mayor, and so on.

I believe that more young people would become interested in this kind of civic leadership if they learned more from their history courses about sacrifices that previous generations of great Americans made to secure the benefits of the American dream for those to come. As several of the Founding Fathers warned, freedom requires sacrifice. A call to sacrifice, a call to dedicate themselves to a noble cause, is exactly what young people need. They do not need to be told, "Don't worry. We're going to do everything for you. We're going to protect you. We're going to provide money and security and all the things you need without your having to do anything." That is not what brings out the best in young people. They want to be called on to chip in. They want to think that their lives matter, that they can make a difference. The idea that service to the country is a noble cause is an idea that many generations have shared. There are a lot of people in the history of our country who have sacrificed and given us the great blessings that we have. We don't want to just be nostalgic in our thinking about the "greatest generation" and so on. It's also very important that we have hopes for our children and our grandchildren to become great generations themselves and to do

whatever is needed to secure the future of the country they will inherit. This is the mission that we older people can have: to pass along to the younger generation the mission of taking good care of this exceptional country that we're living in.

We have a good starting point. I've given you evidence of that. Young Americans today are eager to find purposes in life and to work toward achieving them. They've already figured out opportunities our country offers. These young Americans deserve our encouragement to maintain their optimistic beliefs about our future.

Notes

1. Christopher Jencks, "Reinventing the American Dream." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 17, 2008, B6.

2. William M. Rohe and Harry L. Watson, *Chasing the American Dream: New Perspectives on Affordable Homeownership* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

3. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bait and Switch: The Futile Pursuit of the American Dream* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005).