

American Dream Assignment

Background Essay

What is the American Dream?

James Truslow Adams, in his book *The Epic of America*, which was written in 1931, stated that the American dream is "that dream of 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 a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. 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." (p. 214-215)

The authors of the United States' Declaration of Independence held certain truths to be self-evident: that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." Might this sentiment be considered the foundation of the American Dream?

Were homesteaders who left the big cities of the east to find happiness and their piece of land in the unknown wilderness pursuing these inalienable Rights? Were the immigrants who came to the United States looking for their bit of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, their Dream? And what did the desire of the veteran of World War II - to settle down, to have a home, a car and a family - tell us about this evolving Dream? Is the American Dream attainable by all Americans?

Some say, that the American Dream has become the pursuit of material prosperity - that people work more hours to get bigger cars, fancier homes, the fruits of prosperity for their families - but have less time to enjoy their prosperity. Others say that the American Dream is beyond the grasp of the working poor who must work two jobs to insure their family's survival. Yet others look toward a new American Dream with less focus on financial gain and more emphasis on living a simple, fulfilling life.

Thomas Wolfe said, "...to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining, golden opportunitythe right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him."

Is this your American Dream?

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/american-dream/students/thedream.html>

Questions:

- 1) What is your definition of the American Dream?
- 2) How and why do you think the American Dream has changed over time?
- 3) Why is the American Dream mean something different to other people? For instance, why might your American Dream differ from that of a farmer in Nebraska?