“American Dream” AP Synthesis Essay Writing

Is it still possible in our country for everyone to achieve the American Dream?


The theme of the American dream has inspired many artists, writers, politicians, and teachers for decades. Every year, students and professional writers, both native-born and immigrants, write many essays exploring their beliefs about the American dream. Politicians invoke the dream in speeches, teachers develop class plans to study the dream, and Hollywood returns to the dream in movie after movie, to the delight of millions of filmgoers. Many people nod with understanding when the dream is mentioned because it has become a powerful symbol of the aspirations of a nation of immigrants. Yet the phrase "the American dream" is misleading because it implies that there is only one dream. In fact, there are many versions of the American dream, and how people define it depends greatly on their age, cultural identity, and citizenship status.

In 2004 the National League of Cities (NLC) conducted a survey of more than one thousand participants aged eighteen and older, asking them what they considered the American dream to be. The NLC found that for the majority of Americans—adults aged twenty-three to sixty-five—material prosperity is at the heart of the American dream. For many this prosperity is symbolized by home ownership. The hope that children will be able to build on the success of their parents and rise to a higher social class is also a central aspect of the American dream for millions of Americans and immigrants. As the Aspen Institute, a research institute on American culture and policy, proclaims, "the opportunity to save, invest [in the future] and own is the foundation of the American dream."

For many adults older than sixty-five, however, financial abundance takes second place to quality of life in their vision of the American dream. Over one-fourth of the older respondents of the NLC survey rated the ability to enjoy good health as the primary priority, in contrast to only 5 percent of the eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-old respondents. Author Gary Goshgarian also describes the importance of health in his best-selling popular culture anthology *The Contemporary Reader*:

Healthiness is a part of the American Dream that everyone seems to overlook. I believe that when it comes to living a so called 'perfect life' there is nothing more important than having good health. A person can have all the money in the world; a person can have all the spare time in the world; a person can have the most loving family in the world; however, what good is all of this if he or she is dying from an incurable disease?

Young Americans aged eighteen to twenty-nine also hold a view of the American dream in which prosperity is secondary. According to the NLC survey, over 45 percent of the younger respondents believe that living in freedom is the most important aspect of the American dream. Twenty-five-year-old Chris Hueter explains this version of the
dream on his "Magnifisyncopathological" Web site. "The bedrock underneath [the dream]," writes Hueter, "is the fundamental right to one's life and to decide how to live it. When people dream about saving lives through medicine, becoming President, making themselves rich, or quietly living with those [they] love, what they are really dreaming about is the freedom to do so."

For many Americans the American dream is living in a country where all citizens have equal rights and opportunities. For example, American minorities who have experienced discrimination tend to envision a dream that eliminates inequality and prejudice. In a famous speech made on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. described the essence of this dream. Before thousands of onlookers, he said:

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."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

King's American dream that all citizens will someday receive equal protection under the U.S. Constitution and will live in a nation where "they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" is a dream held by many in America.

The dream of equality encompasses the dream of having the right to own land—a right that for many years was denied to African Americans—women, and other minorities. Author Audrey Edwards describes the history of injustices African Americans have faced:

For more than 300 years we were slaves in America, which by definition excluded us from owning anything at all. And even when we were freed and told we might receive 40 acres and a mule following the Civil War, it was a proposal soon undermined. Indeed, much of our history with land and property ownership in America has revolved around our seeing it stolen, burned to the ground, redlined or denied through blockbusting.

Although discrimination still exists, since the civil rights movement more African Americans have achieved the dream of owning a home and having financial security.

For many immigrants the American dream is about enjoying civil rights as well as the opportunity to gain economic security. This is especially true for new Americans emigrating from countries that suppress political and religious diversity and persecute those who disagree with the government. Tehreem Rehman, a Pakistani student from New York, writes, "My dad came here because he wanted more opportunities, better living standards, equal rights, and most of all his freedom. He wanted freedom of speech, thought, and worship." Immigrants who have been oppressed in other nations take solace in the words inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to be free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!
In the twenty-first century millions of Americans continue to pursue the American dream, however they envision it. In *At Issue: Is the American Dream a Myth?* Americans from many backgrounds debate whether these dreams of economic opportunity, personal liberty, and civil rights are still within reach in America. Given the importance of these dreams to society, having a greater understanding of these debates is crucial.


Matthew Warshauer is a professor of American history at Central Connecticut State University and is currently writing two books about President Andrew Jackson.

The American dream has always included achieving financial success; however, the celebrated method of acquiring money has changed over the centuries of American history. Early versions of the American dream honored thrift and hard work as the preferred way to become successful. Since the industrial revolution, however, Americans have dreamed about finding shortcuts to extravagant wealth, including winning on lucrative game shows or buying a lucky lottery ticket. Some people have also attempted to win millions of dollars in lawsuits in their pursuit of the American dream of instant wealth. The emphasis on good fortune rather than industriousness and perseverance is eroding the work ethic that once made the American dream a respectable goal.

Traditionally, Americans have sought to realize the American dream of success, fame and wealth through thrift and hard work. However, the industrialization of the 19th and 20th centuries began to erode the dream, replacing it with a philosophy of "get rich quick". A variety of seductive but elusive strategies have evolved, and today the three leading ways to instant wealth are large-prize television game shows, big-jackpot state lotteries and compensation lawsuits.

How does one achieve the American Dream? The answer undoubtedly depends upon one's definition of the Dream, and there are many from which to choose. John Winthrop envisioned a religious paradise in a "City upon a Hill." Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed of racial equality. Both men yearned for what they perceived as perfection. Scholars have recognized widely varying conceptions of these quests for American excellence. One component of the American Dream seems, however, to be fairly consistent: the quest for money. Few will deny that Americans are intently focused on the "almighty dollar." In a society dedicated to capitalism and the maxim that, "the one who dies with the most toys wins," the ability to purchase a big house and a nice car separates those who are considered successful from those who are not. Yet the question remains, how does one achieve this success? How is the Dream realized? For many Americans the formula is one of instant, albeit elusive, gratification. Rather than adhering to a traditional work ethic, far too many Americans are pinning their hopes on what they perceive as "easy" money. This article focuses on three phenomena in contemporary American society that have successfully captured the quest for the American Dream. Savvy marketers have convinced their audiences that a new wave of television game shows, lottery luck, and lucrative lawsuits are the way to wealth.


It is difficult to resolve the difference between the media world and the real world. The difference is often jarring, especially when going to a place which tries to imitate what is shoveled out of the tube. The deliberate sleekness and marketing savvy of stores nowadays guarantees you that your shopping experience will be full of noise, flash, and every device imaginable to get you to part with your money. Malls today are carefully designed to disorient the shopper and temporarily "trap" them within their walls. This is true of grocery stores, too—where companies buy shelf space and carefully place items where certain categories of people will look. Parents get trapped into buying the heavily sugared cereal placed at the precise eye level of their young consumer target. Noise is prevalent, omnipresent, and deliberate. Entertainment stores and places that sell music and movies probably have stock in hearing aid companies, since they play the awful music they peddle at such high volumes. And even restaurants, the last bastion of civility, run at earsplitting volume. And if you are lucky enough to find a quiet, intimate place to eat, someone is sure to bring in a child who is not old enough to appreciate the food or the atmosphere and make its displeasure loudly known.

The American Dream is a delusion, an illusion meant to keep people dissatisfied and hungering to spend more money, in the hopes that the next purchase will be the one that buys them the happiness they are promised. What no one told our framers is that happiness isn't a commodity. It is something that is internal, easily found, and free of charge. Happiness and the reality of the American Dream are found in abandoning the false dream, and creating one of your own. Understanding that all the trappings of Western culture are props in a badly acted movie, and that you can throw their script away and make one of your own is a liberating experience. It is possible to have a wonderfully rich and fulfilling life without designer clothes, a wedding register, minivan, suburban house, or even a TV. In fact, turning the TV off is the first step in reclaiming your own dream.

It is a daring thing—even a little scary—creating your own reality. But it can be done, and is ultimately more satisfying than the fill-in-the blank blandness that our culture dictates to us. Americans were truly originals once. Now we are a whining bunch of overfed adolescents, wanting all the toys and none of the responsibility. It's time to grow up, and create a new dream. Go on—I dare you to.


Tonight is a particular honor for me because, let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack. His father -- my grandfather -- was a cook, a domestic servant to the British. But my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. Through hard work and perseverance my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place, America, that shone as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before.

While studying here, my father met my mother. She was born in a town on the other side of the world, in Kansas. Her father worked on oil rigs and farms through most of the Depression. The day after Pearl Harbor my grandfather signed up for duty; joined Patton’s army, marched across Europe. Back home, my grandmother raised a baby and went to work on a bomber assembly line. After the war, they studied on the G.I. Bill, bought a house through F.H.A., and later moved west all the way to Hawaii in search of opportunity.

And they had big dreams. A common dream, born of two continents.

My parents shared not only an improbable love, they shared an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation. They would give me an African name, Barack, or "blessed," believing that in a tolerant America your name is no barrier to success. They imagined -- They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren’t rich, because in a generous America you don’t have to be rich to achieve your potential. They're both passed away now. And yet, I know that on this night they look down on me with great pride.
They stand here -- And I stand here today, grateful for the diversity of my heritage, aware that my parents’ dreams live on in my two precious daughters. I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth, is my story even possible.

Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our Nation — not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy. Our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over two hundred years ago:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

That is the true genius of America, a faith -- a faith in simple dreams, an insistence on small miracles; that we can tuck in our children at night and know that they are fed and clothed and safe from harm; that we can say what we think, write what we think, without hearing a sudden knock on the door; that we can have an idea and start our own business without paying a bribe; that we can participate in the political process without fear of retribution, and that our votes will be counted.

**Source E: Longley, Robert. *Two Thirds Feel American Dream Harder to Achieve.* US Government Research for the National League of Cities. 1 October 2004.**

Two-thirds of the American people say the American Dream is becoming harder to achieve, especially for young families, and they point to financial insecurity and poor quality public education as the most significant barriers, according to a new survey released today by the National League of Cities (NLC).

The survey, conducted in August by KRC Research, found that more than one in three Americans feel that they are not living the American Dream and nearly half think it is unattainable for them. The survey also shows considerable growth in the number of people who say government makes it more difficult to achieve the American Dream. Since 2001, there has been an 11 percent increase in the number of Americans who say the government is more of a hindrance than a help.

“America has always had a ‘can do’ attitude. We are the dreamers that make things happen,” said NLC President Charles Lyons. “Breaking down the barriers and giving everyone access to their American Dream is the most important thing elected officials on every level can do. It is our responsibility to make sure that all Americans not only dream the dream, but achieve the dream.”

**Defining the American Dream:** Financial stability (24%) is the most frequently cited characteristic of living the American Dream. However, significant generational differences are apparent. Adults aged 62 and older (23%), those from 45 to 61 (29%) and adults aged 23 to 44 (26%) cite financial security; only 5% of 18-22 year-olds did the same. Living in freedom is the top definition for this age group, cited by 23%. Being financial secure drives the perception of the American Dream for African-Americans and Hispanic adults. Among older respondents, enjoying good health was a critical factor, with 24 percent of those over 65 believing this defines the American Dream for them.

**Optimism Reigns, but Many Left Behind:** Although Americans remain optimistic, significant numbers of older Americans, women, single parents, minorities and blue-collar workers believe the American Dream is out of their reach. - Adults living in urban cities (39%) are more likely to believe than suburbanites (19%) that where they live has affected their ability to achieve the American Dream.
- Fifty-three percent of African-Americans said they are not living the American Dream; 36% of Hispanics and 32% of Caucasians have the same view.

- Almost twice as many single parents (52%) as married parents (27%) report they are not living the American Dream.

- More than half of renters (52%) and 28% of home owners find they are not living the American Dream.

- Democrats (79%) and Independents (75%) are more likely to say the American Dream is harder for young families to achieve than Republicans (56%).

**Lack of Quality Education, Financial Security Top Concerns:** A lack of quality public education and uncertainty over financial security top the list of barriers to the American Dream. Caucasian (27%) and Hispanic (29%) adults cite poor quality of education as the main barrier, with African-Americans more likely to report racial or ethnic discrimination as the main obstacle (28%).

**Government as Help or Hindrance:** A solid majority of all Americans (72%) believe that the government should actively work to help people achieve the American Dream. This is particularly true of young people (90% of 18 to 22-year-olds agree). But almost half (45%) believe the government has done more to hinder their pursuit of the American Dream than help, up from 34% in 2001. Eighty-five percent say that local, state and federal government must work together to give people a fair shot at achieving the American Dream.

“The poll shows that while Americans believe the government should play a role in helping them achieve the American Dream, they are skeptical about whether the government can actually get the job done,” Lyons said. “This is an alarming finding that shows the need to work together at all levels of government and across party lines to ensure hope, fairness and opportunity.”


Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you. What a greeting. What a greeting. Wow!

This -- This is like winning an Oscar. As if I would know! Speaking of acting, one of my movies was called "True Lies." And that's what the Democrats should have called their convention. You know, on the way up here to the podium, a gentlemen came up to me and said, "Governor, you are as good a politician as you were an actor." What a cheap shot. Cannot believe it.

Anyway, my fellow Americans, this is an amazing moment for me. To think that a once scrawny boy from Austria could grow up to become Governor of the State of California and then stand here -- and stand here in Madison Square Garden and speak on behalf of the President of the United States. That is an immigrant's dream! It's the American dream.

You know, I was born in Europe and I’ve traveled all over the world, and I can tell you that there is no place, no country, that is more compassionate, more generous, more accepting, and more welcoming than the United States of America.
As long as I live -- As long as I live, I will never forget the day 21 years ago when I raised my right hand and I took the oath of citizenship. You know how proud I was? I was so proud that I walked around with the American flag around my shoulder all day long.

Tonight, I want to talk to you about why I'm even more proud to be an American -- why I am proud to be a Republican, and why I believe that this country is in good hands.

When I was a boy, the Soviets occupied part of Austria. I saw their tanks in the streets. I saw communism with my own eyes. I remember the fear we had when we had to cross into the Soviet sector. Growing up, we were told, "Don't look the soldiers in the eye. Just look straight ahead." It was common belief that the Soviet soldiers could take a man out of his own car and ship him back to the Soviet Union as slave labor.

Now my family didn't have a car -- but one day we were in my uncle's car. It was near dark as we came to the Soviet checkpoint. I was a little boy. I was not an action hero back then. But I remember -- I remember how scared I was that the soldiers would pull my father or my uncle out of the car and I would never see them again. My family and so many others lived in fear of the Soviet boot. Today, the world no longer fears the Soviet Union and it is because of the United States of America!

As a kid -- As a kid I saw socialist -- the socialist country that Austria became after the Soviets left. Now don't misunderstand me: I love Austria and I love the Austrian people. But I always knew that America was the place for me. In school, when the teacher would talk about America, I would daydream about coming here. I would daydream about living here. I would sit there and watch for hours American movies, transfixed by my heroes, like John Wayne. Everything about America -- Everything about America seemed so big to me, so open, so possible.

I finally arrived here in 1968. What a special day it was. I remember I arrived here with empty pockets, but full of dreams, full of determination, full of desire.

To my fellow immigrants listening tonight, I want you to know how welcome you are in this party. We Republicans admire your ambition. We encourage your dreams. We believe in your future. And one thing I learned about America is that if you work hard and if you play by the rules, this country is truly open to you. You can achieve anything.

Everything I have -- my career, my success, my family -- I owe to America.

In this country, it doesn't make any difference where you were born. It doesn't make any difference who your parents were. It doesn't make any difference if you're like me and you couldn't even speak English until you were in your twenties.

America gave me opportunities and my immigrant dreams came true. I want other people to get the same chances I did, the same opportunities. And I believe they can. That's why I believe in this country. We are America.

We are -- We are the America that sends out the Peace Corps volunteers to teach our village children. We are the America that sends out the missionaries and doctors to raise up the poor and the sick. We are the America that gives more than any other country to fight AIDS in Africa and the developing world. And we are -- And we are the America that fights not for imperialism but for human rights and democracy.

You know, when the Germans brought down the Berlin Wall, America's determination helped wield the sledgehammers. And when the lone, young Chinese man stood in front of those tanks in Tiananmen Square,
America stood with him. And when Nelson Mandela smiled in election victory after all those years in prison, America celebrated, too.

We are still the lamp lighting the world, especially [for] those who struggle. No matter in what labor camp they slave, no matter in what injustice they're trapped, they hear our call; they see our light; and they feel the pull of our freedom.

They come here as I did because they believe. They believe in us. They come because their hearts say to them, as mine did, "If only I can get to America." You know, someone once wrote: "There are those who say that freedom is nothing but a dream." They are right. It's the American dream.

No matter the nationality, no matter the religion, no matter the ethnic background, America brings out the best in people. And as Governor -- as Governor of the great state of California, I see the best in Americans every day -- I see the best in Americans everyday -- our police, our firefighters, our nurses, doctors, and teachers, our parents.

Well, ladies and gentlemen -- ladies and gentlemen, America is back. Back from the attack on our homeland, back from the attack on our economy, and back from the attack on our way of life.

My fellow Americans, I want you to know that I believe with all my heart that America remains "the great idea" that inspires the world. It is a privilege to be born here. It is an honor to become a citizen here. It is a gift to raise your family here, to vote here and to live here.

Thank you, America. Thank you and God bless you all. Thank you. Thank you.


Education and the American Dream

Since America's founding, education has been a pillar of American success. Hochschild has written that "the American dream is the promise that all who live in the United States have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they understand it (material or otherwise) through their own efforts and resources".(Hochschild 2001:35) Many people believe that a significant resource in achieving the American Dream is by attaining an education. Education, for the most part, determines a person's job opportunities and level of income. It has become an understanding that without an education the idea of the "American Dream" seems out of reach. Education has become one of the central institutions in making the American Dream a reality. "Schools are expected to teach children enough so that they can choose their own vision of success and then to give them the skills they need to pursue that vision". (Hochschild 2001:36) However, not all public schools in the United States are equal in any aspect of education. This may lead to unequal opportunities for certain children based on their location or income level.

For example, in Jennifer Hochschild’s article Public Schools and the American Dream (2001) and Heather Johnson’s book The American Dream and the Power of Wealth: Choosing Schools and Inheriting Inequality in the Land of Opportunity (2006) both Hochschild and Johnson identify the role of public education as one that is supposed to level out what is initially an uneven playing field. However, both authors assert that economic inequality, racial segregation and inequalities created by inherited wealth result in public schools that are separate and unequal, a direct contradiction to the American ideology of meritocracy. (Johnson 2006:46) Therefore, as Hochschild asserts, public schools is the place where many of the lower class and minorities first encounter
disadvantages in their pursuit of the dream because these schools don’t equalize opportunities across generations but instead become the arena in which many Americans first fail.

Hochschild believes that educational policies that can help children with unequal opportunities achieve the goals of the American Dream are desegregation, inclusion, school choice, school finance reform and standards based reforms. However, these policies must be approved by individual state policymakers. Although the benefits from these policies would be great, the power is in the hands of the wealthy, which may not see a need to enhance education policies. Therefore the cycle of inequality remains for those on the lower end of the social ladder.