

INTRODUCTION



The Making and Persistence of the American Dream

John Kenneth White

Sandra L. Hanson

THE AMERICAN DREAM remains a vibrant concept that Americans comprehend and define in various ways as relevant to their own life experiences. The endurance of this “great epic,” as it was once so famously described (Adams 1941, 405), is remarkable, especially given the depressions, recessions, economic contractions, and battles over civil rights, women’s rights, and gender equality that the United States has witnessed over the years. These economic struggles have been hard and are presently ongoing, starting with the severe economic downturn that began in December 2007 and resulted in government bailouts of the U.S. banking and automotive industries and the election of Barack Obama to the presidency, all before the end of a single calendar year. But other struggles, too, have caused citizens to redefine the American Dream. For much of our history, African Americans and women were excluded from its promise. It would be left to Martin Luther King and feminist leaders to enlarge the American Dream to include themselves and to encourage their constituencies to have a stake in its success. In 2008, Americans voted in their first African American president. This dramatic moment in American history combined with one of the most severe economic downturns since the Great Depression provide the backdrop for this volume on the American Dream.

The American Dream throughout History

The resiliency of the American Dream can be traced to the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and its promise that citizens of the new nation

were already endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, including life and liberty, and that these same people were entitled to engage in many varied pursuits of happiness. These pursuits of happiness often ended with many finding some degree of fulfillment. Writing in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville declared that the Americans he encountered had “acquired or retained sufficient education and fortune to satisfy their own wants.” Tocqueville added that they “owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man, they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and *they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands*” (Tocqueville 1989, 194; emphasis added).

These sentiments give the American Dream its staying power. Not surprisingly, Americans have looked to their leaders since the nation’s founding to reaffirm the promise of the American Dream, with its guarantees of fuller liberties and a better life for all. In his 2009 inaugural address, Obama gave testimony to the Dream’s endurance, citing his own life’s journey to become the first African American president: “This is the meaning of our liberty and creed, why men and women and children of every race and every faith can join in celebration across this magnificent mall. And why a man whose father less than sixty years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath” (Obama 2009).

Yet it is not only in government documents or presidential speeches that the American Dream finds expression. The popular culture also has given the American Dream a powerful voice. Contrasting his gritty childhood in Brooklyn at the turn of the twentieth century with his stunning success on Broadway by the age of twenty-five, playwright Moss Hart concluded that the American Dream belonged not only to him but to everyone: “It was possible in this wonderful city for that nameless little boy—for any of its millions—to have a decent chance to scale the walls and achieve what they wished. Wealth, rank, or an imposing name counted for nothing. The only credential the city asked was the boldness to dream. For those who did, it unlocked its gates and its treasures, not caring who they were or where they came from” (Hart 1959, 436). Years later, the Brian De Palma film *Scarface* had a trailer describing the main character this way: “He loved the American Dream. With a vengeance” (Kamp 2009).

Surprisingly, the term “American Dream” is of relatively recent vintage. Journalist Walter Lippmann first used the term “American Dream”

in a 1914 book titled *Drift and Mastery* in which he urged readers to find a new Dream for the twentieth century that would end the malaise of government inaction that had allowed American politics to aimlessly drift (Jillson 2004, 6). But historian James Truslow Adams popularized the phrase “American Dream” in 1931. In his book titled *The Epic of America* (and whose working title was *The American Dream*), Adams described the American Dream in terms Hart would recognize: “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (Adams 1941, 404). But, for Adams, the American Dream involved something more than mere acquisition of wealth and fame:

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 their birth. . . . It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. And that dream has been realized more fully in actual life here than anywhere else, though very imperfectly even among ourselves. (Ibid., 404–405)

At its core, the American Dream represents a state of mind—that is, an enduring optimism given to a people who might be tempted to succumb to the travails of adversity, but who, instead, repeatedly rise from the ashes to continue to build a great nation. Even in the midst of the Great Depression, Adams was confident that the United States would overcome its difficulties and that the American Dream would endure thanks to a prevailing optimism that sustains it. This die-hard optimism, Adams declared, had already carried the nation from its primitive beginnings into the twentieth century and remained the source of its continued successes:

Beginning with a guard scarce sufficient to defend the stockade at Jamestown against a few naked Indians, we grew until we were able to select from nearly 25,000,000 men of military age such

millions as we would to hurl back at our enemies across the sea, only nine generations later. A continent which scarce sufficed to maintain a half million savages now supports nearly two hundred and fifty times that number of as active and industrious people as there are in the world. The huge and empty land has been filled with homes, roads, railways, schools, colleges, hospitals, and all the comforts of the most advanced material civilization. (Ibid., 401–402)

Notably, Adams penned these words at a time when economic fear was rampant, the stock market had collapsed two years before, the ineffectual Herbert Hoover was president, and the nation's very survival seemed very much in doubt. By 1933, the stock market had lost 75 percent of its 1929 value, national income had been cut in half, exports were at their lowest levels since 1904, and more than six hundred thousand properties (mostly farms) had been foreclosed (Alter 2006, 148). Surveying the economic desolation in January 1933, former president Calvin Coolidge remarked: "In other periods of depression it has always been possible to see some things which were solid and upon which you could base hope. But as I look about me I see nothing to give ground for such hope—nothing of man" (Ibid.). (Within days, Coolidge was dead.) Although Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal brought economic relief, the new president knew that to make his efforts long-lasting, they should be linked to a new American Dream. Accordingly, Roosevelt told his fellow Democrats upon accepting renomination in 1936: "Liberty requires opportunity to make a living decent according to the standard of the time, a living that gives man not only enough to live by, but something to live for." Without the opportunity to make a living, Roosevelt continued, "life was no longer free; liberty no longer real; men could no longer follow the pursuit of happiness" (Roosevelt 1936).

Yet even in the midst of a Great Depression, Americans sensed that their collective futures would be bright, if not for themselves, then surely for their heirs. A poll the Roper Organization conducted in 1938 found only 30 percent agreed that a top limit should be imposed on incomes, with anyone exceeding that limit remitting the excess to the federal government in the form of excise taxes; 61 percent *disagreed* (Roper Organization, 1938). Americans believed economic prosperity was possible and achieving it would ratify the American Dream whose promise of hard work (not good luck) is the path to prosperity. Indeed,

through every period of triumph and tragedy, Adams maintained that the American Dream was the glue that kept the country together: “We have a long and arduous road to travel if we are to realize the American Dream in the life of our nation, but if we fail, there is nothing left but the eternal round. The alternative is the failure of self-government, the failure of the common man to rise to full stature, the failure of all that the American Dream has held of hope and promise for mankind” (Adams 1941, 416).

Adams’s words have echoed throughout the decades, particularly at the onset of Obama’s presidency. Like Roosevelt before him, Obama has had to summon the nation from the sloughs of despair. Accepting the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, Obama sought to cast himself as an exemplar of the American Dream and the best person who could revive and reclaim it for the rest of us:

Four years ago, I stood before you and told you my story, of the brief union between a young man from Kenya and a young woman from Kansas who weren’t well-off or well-known, but shared a belief that in America their son could achieve whatever he put his mind to.

It is that promise that’s always set this country apart, that through hard work and sacrifice each of us can pursue our individual dreams, but still come together as one American family, to ensure that the next generation can pursue their dreams, as well. That’s why I stand here tonight. Because for 232 years, at each moment when that promise was in jeopardy, ordinary men and women, students and soldiers, farmers and teachers, nurses and janitors, found the courage to keep it alive.

We meet at one of those defining moments, a moment when our nation is at war, our economy is in turmoil, and the American promise has been threatened once more. (Obama 2008)

The threat of which Obama spoke was very real. Even as he uttered these words, the nation was mired in a recession judged by most economists to have been the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. More than 7,200,000 jobs were lost; the official unemployment rate exceeded 10 percent for the first time in twenty-nine years; and the number of Americans who gave up looking for work or were marginally attached workers hit the 17 percent mark (Fox 2009). Taking note of

these dismal statistics, Obama declared that they represented “the American Dream [going] in reverse” (Kamp 2009).

Despite these adverse statistics and continued uncertainty regarding whether the prescriptions the Obama administration has issued for economic revival will work, faith in the American Dream itself remains strong. In 2009, 75 percent told pollsters from CBS News and the *New York Times* that they had either already achieved the American Dream or that they expected to achieve it; only one in five said it was unattainable (CBS News/*New York Times* 2009). Sociologist Barry Glassner explained why the American Dream was not imperiled, despite the straightened economic circumstances:

You want to hold onto your dream when times are hard. For the vast majority of Americans at every point in history, the prospect of achieving the American Dream has been slim, but the promise has been huge. . . . At its core, this notion that anyone can be president, or anyone can be a billionaire, is absurd. A lot of Americans work hard, but they don't become president and they don't become billionaires. (Seelye 2009)

Yet for many Americans, holding onto the American Dream has become increasingly more difficult. During his presidency, Bill Clinton defined the American Dream this way: “If you work hard and play by the rules, you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you” (Jillson 2004, 7). But in the years since, many Americans have hit a glass ceiling. In 2002, Barbara Ehrenreich began to hear from college graduates and white-collar workers who upbraided her for not taking note of their hard-luck stories, “despite doing everything else right.” As one unhappy middle-class correspondent told Ehrenreich:

Try investigating people like me who didn't have babies in high school, who made good grades, who work hard and don't kiss a lot of ass and instead of getting promoted or paid fairly must regress to working for \$7/hr., having their student loans in perpetual deferment, living at home with their parents, and generally exist in debt which they feel they may never get out of. (Ehrenreich 2005, 1–2)

As Phyllis Moen and Patricia Roehling have observed, “The American Dream is itself a metaphor for occupational success, a metaphor that works for the winners of the educational and occupational career game, but that remains elusive for growing numbers of men and women across age, class, educational, racial, ethnic, and geographical divides” (Moen and Roehling 2005, 188).

Even so, the American Dream still endures, and that endurance is a testament to its power. Some years ago, singer/songwriter Bruce Springsteen wondered aloud in a song entitled “The River” whether the American Dream was a lie or it represented something worse (White 1990, 28). But this is a question that most Americans do not want to consider. Instead of questioning the American Dream, Americans are more likely to blame themselves when things do not turn out as they hoped. Nearly a half century ago, a mechanic admitted as much in an interview:

I could have been a lot better off but through my own foolishness, I’m not. What causes poverty? Foolishness. When I came out of the service, my wife had saved a few dollars and I had a few bucks. I wanted to have a good time, I’m throwing money away like water. Believe me, had I used my head right, I could have had a house. I don’t feel sorry for myself, what happened, happened, you know. Of course you pay for it. (Lane 1962, 69)

Years later, an Iowa farmer facing foreclosure expressed a similar view: “My boys all made good. It’s their old man who failed” (Malcolm 1987).

The fact is that the American Dream is deeply embedded in American mythology and in the consciousness of its citizens. That is exactly what gives the American Dream its staying power, even in times when it seems as though it should surely die. After all, myths last because they are dreams fulfilled in our imaginations. So it is with the American Dream. And because it finds fulfillment either in one’s own life or in the lives of others, Americans are ever more devoted to it. In 1978, Garry Wills famously observed that in the United States, one must adopt the American Dream “wholeheartedly, proclaim it, prove one’s devotion to it” (Wills 1978, xxii). Twenty years later, political scientist Alan Wolfe interviewed Henry Johnson, a successful, middle-class black man from DeKalb County, Georgia, who declared his ongoing faith in the American Dream despite the adversities he had encountered in life: “I think

the American Dream is alive and well, and I think I could sell the American Dream to my kids through myself. This stuff about working hard and being morally sound and the more you give, the more you receive and things will come to you. I think those are all things that are not fantasies. Those things can happen and, through my own experiences, those things have happened. . . . Like I said, I believe in the American Dream, I do.” Sitting nearby, Johnson’s wife told the interviewer, “Wow, that was good; quote him on that” (Wolfe 1998, 317–318).

One reason the American Dream endures is that it has been closely intertwined with deeply held American values, especially freedom and equality of opportunity. In a 2008 poll, 75 percent strongly agreed with this statement: “America is unique among all nations, because it is founded on the ideals of freedom, equality, and opportunity” (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research 2008). Pollsters for CBS News and the *New York Times* found 27 percent of respondents specifically linked the American Dream to the values of freedom and equality of opportunity. Typical among the responses were these:

- “Freedom to live our own life.”
- “Someone could start from nothing.”
- “That everybody has a fair chance to succeed.”
- “To become whatever I want to be.”
- “To be healthy and have nice family and friends.”
- “More like Huck Finn; escape to the unknown; follow your dreams.” (Seelye 2009)

The linking of the American Dream to equality of opportunity is particularly important to understanding the Dream’s endurance. Equality of opportunity is a powerful concept, because, unlike other individual rights that can be easily taken away by authoritarian governments (e.g., freedoms of speech and religious worship), it is a state of mind that is virtually impossible to eliminate. As the historian Adams wrote, “I once had an intelligent young Frenchman as a guest in New York, and after a few days I asked him what struck him most among his new impressions. Without hesitation, he replied, “The way that everyone of every sort looks you right in the eye, without a thought of inequality” (Adams 1941, 404). Tocqueville once declared that if given the choice between freedom and equality, most Americans would choose the latter for that very reason (Tocqueville 1989, 96). Although Tocqueville

wrote about nineteenth-century Americans, his words still have resonance. Englishman G. K. Chesterton noted that what separated the United States from his native country in the twentieth century was the American commitment to a democratic theory based on the idea of equality: “It is the pure classic conception that no man must aspire to be anything more than a citizen, and that no man should endure anything less.” The ideal citizen, said Chesterton, was someone who believed in “an absolute of morals by which all men have a value invariable and indestructible and a dignity as intangible as death” (Chesterton 1922, 16–17). At the onset of the twenty-first century, the words of Adams, Tocqueville, and Chesterton remain Rosetta stones to understanding how the battles over civil rights for African Americans, feminist rights, and gay rights are working their way toward greater equality for more Americans.

As the recent struggles over civil rights, women’s rights, and gay rights illustrate, the American Dream is not a static concept. Although Americans have historically associated the American Dream with the values of freedom and equality of opportunity, these values have undergone various iterations over the years. Remarkably, the very first survey concerning the American Dream was not conducted until 1985, when CBS News and the *New York Times* asked a question that explicitly tied the American Dream to the concept of home ownership: “Do you think that people who may never own a house miss out on an important part of the American Dream?” Not surprisingly, 76 percent answered “yes” (CBS News/*New York Times* 1985). Other surveys have demonstrated how powerfully connected the American Dream is to a quantified measure of economic success (particularly educational attainment), including these responses:

- 84 percent said it meant being able to get a high school education. (*Wall Street Journal* 1986)
- 79 percent said it meant owning a home. (Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates 2008)
- 77 percent said it meant being able to send one’s children to college. (Ibid.)
- 76 percent said it meant being optimistic about the future. (Ibid.)
- 68 percent said it meant being able to get a college education. (Ibid.)

10 ■ John Kenneth White and Sandra L. Hanson

64 percent said it meant being financially secure enough to have ample time for leisure pursuits. (Ibid.)

61 percent said it meant doing better than your parents did. (Ibid.)

58 percent said it meant being able to start a business on one's own. (Ibid.)

52 percent said it meant being able to rise from clerk or worker to president of a company. (Ibid.)

But although the American Dream remains closely tied to the values of freedom and equality of opportunity, its iterations throughout the years have changed. When a Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates 2008 study asked respondents to define the American Dream, the responses were more spiritual and vested in emotional, rather than material, security. Substantial majorities considered the following items to be a “major part” of the American Dream:

Having a good family life, 93 percent (Ibid.)

Having quality health care for myself and my family, 90 percent (Ibid.)

Having educational opportunities for myself and my family, 88 percent (Ibid.)

Being able to speak your mind regardless of the positions you take, 85 percent (Ibid.)

Having a comfortable and secure retirement, 85 percent (Ibid.)

Being able to succeed regardless of your family background or where you come from, 82 percent (Ibid.)

Being economically secure and not having to worry about being able to afford things, 81 percent (Ibid.)

Achieving peace in the world, 63 percent (Ibid.)

Having the time to enjoy the good things in life without having to work too many hours, 59 percent (Ibid.)

Reducing the effects of global warming, 56 percent (Ibid.)

Certainly, although economic security continues to define the American Dream, the Dream itself has been broadened to include a greater sense of personal well-being and quality-of-life issues (such as having access to quality health care, working toward world peace, and reducing the harmful effects of global warming).

A Dream in Doubt? No. Harder to Achieve? Yes.

In an early-twentieth-century work titled *Success among the Nations*, historian Emil Reich declared that Americans were possessed “with such an implicit and absolute confidence in their Union and in their future success, that any remark other than laudatory is unacceptable to the majority of them,” adding, “We have had many opportunities of hearing public speakers in America cast doubts upon the very existence of God and of Providence, question the historic nature or veracity of the whole fabric of Christianity; but it has never been our fortune to catch the slightest whisper of doubt, the slightest want of faith, in the chief God of America, unlimited belief in the future of America” (Reich 1904, 265–266).

But in recent years, expressions of self-doubt about the nation’s future have been uttered more frequently. Vice President Joseph Biden, for one, has said that “the American economic dream has begun to evaporate” (Dionne, Jr. 1987). What is striking is that the vice president made this declaration more than two decades ago as a candidate seeking the Democratic presidential nomination in 1988. Not surprisingly, when economic difficulties beset the nation, one might suspect (a Great Depression notwithstanding) that the American Dream will take a beating. So it is today. According to the most recent surveys:

75 percent claim the American Dream is not as attainable today as it was when George W. Bush was elected president in 2000. (Zogby International 2008)

59 percent believe the American Dream will be harder for today’s children under the age of eighteen to achieve. (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and Public Opinion Strategies 2009)

57 percent say the American Dream will be harder for them to achieve in the next decade. (*Time*/Abt SRBI 2009)

54 percent believe the American Dream has become “impossible” for most people to achieve. (Opinion Research Corporation 2006)

50 percent think they are either “somewhat far” or “very far” from achieving the American Dream. (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation/*Washington Post*/Harvard University 2008)

Despite these daunting statistics, faith in the American Dream persists. In March 2009, a moment when the economic crisis was palpable,

the Gallup Organization and *USA Today* found an overwhelming 72 percent still agreed with this statement: “If you work hard and play by the rules, you will be able to achieve the American Dream in your lifetime” (Gallup Organization/*USA Today* 2009). Moreover, 69 percent believed their children would achieve the American Dream (Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates 2008).

In one sense, the American Dream will always remain elusive and, therefore, disappoint us. A 2008 survey makes the point: 84 percent agreed that the American Dream is “a never-ending pursuit [and] I can always do more to achieve it” (Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates 2008). Achieving the American Dream will always be partly an individual pursuit. Yet it is also a Dream that we entrust to our presidents. The subtitle of Obama’s book *The Audacity of Hope* reads “thoughts on reclaiming the American Dream” (Obama 2006). It is not, as Obama suggests, that the American Dream is lost; rather, there is a prevailing sense (and hope) that he can somehow *renew* the American Dream. As Vice President Biden declared in his 1988 presidential quest: “The role of a President in mobilizing our society is to convince all of our citizens that they can and must shape their own future and the nation’s future” (Dionne, Jr. 1987). If Obama can fulfill this vital role of the presidency, the American Dream will thrive. If not, the American Dream will still endure, in spite of our disappointments.

The historic economic, political, and social times of this period in the twenty-first century is the context in which we provide an examination of the American Dream. In the pages that follow, experts from multiple disciplines provide insight into the nature and resilience of the American Dream in this time frame, with a special focus on the millennial recession and the election of President Obama. The discussion begins with “Twilight’s Gleaming: The American Dream and the Ends of Republics,” in which American Studies expert James Cullen provides historical insight into the American Dream by drawing parallels with the Roman republic and empire. Cullen argues that many of the most cherished aspects of the American Dream, such as upward mobility, have clear antecedents in other civilizations. The next two chapters provide a political critique of the American Dream. Historian Michael Kimmage’s chapter (“The Politics of the American Dream, 1980 to 2008”) examines the Depression, the New Deal, and party platforms to reveal the optimism and enthusiasm for particular versions of the American Dream in the United States. Political scientist John White’s

chapter on “The Presidency and the Making of the American Dream” also notes historical variation in the Dream in his examination of the American presidency as a place where the American Dream has become personified. Sociologists Jim Loewen and Sandra Hanson provide insight into racial and gender variation in the American Dream in the next two chapters. In his chapter (“Dreaming in Black and White”) Loewen examines race-based residential segregation and the Dream of two separate Americas. Hanson (“Whose American Dream? Gender and the American Dream”) uses a series of public opinion polls on the American Dream to show how achievement of and attitudes toward the American Dream vary for men and women. American political pollster John Zogby’s chapter (“Want Meets Necessity in the New American Dream”) compiles decades of public opinion polling data to reveal the nature and strength of the American Dream with a consideration of generational differences, the impact of September 11, the economic downturn, and the Obama presidency. Sociologist William D’Antonio provides a Catholic reflection on the role of religion in defining the Dream and making it achievable for all. In the conclusion (“The American Dream: Where Are We?”), the editors reveal the complexity of the American Dream using sociological, political, and historical frames of reference. They find that although evidence of the Dream’s continued existence is abundant, its meaning has been altered and the Great Recession has tempered the Dream itself. This situation remains the case despite the optimism that came with the election of the first African American to the presidency and Obama’s repeated attempts to instill public confidence.

Polls

CBS News/*New York Times*, poll, April 1–5, 2009. Text of question: “Do you think you will reach, as you define it, ‘The American Dream’ in your lifetime, or have you already reached it?” Already reached it, 44 percent; will reach it in my lifetime, 31 percent; will not reach it in my lifetime, 20 percent; don’t know/no answer, 5 percent.

CBS News/*New York Times*, poll, January 14–17, 1985. Text of question: “Do you think that people who may never own a house miss out on an important part of the American Dream?” Yes, 76 percent; no, 19 percent; don’t know/no answer, 5 percent.

Gallup Organization/*USA Today*, poll, March 2, 2009. Text of question: “Which is closer to your view—if you work hard and play by the rules, you will be able to achieve the American Dream in your lifetime, or even by working

hard and playing by the rules, the American Dream is unattainable for you?” If you work hard and play by the rules, you will be able to achieve the American Dream in your lifetime, 72 percent; even by working hard and playing by the rules, the American Dream is unattainable for you, 25 percent; don’t know, 2 percent; refused, 1 percent.

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and Public Opinion Strategies, poll, January 27–February 8, 2009. Text of question: “Thinking about young people, do you think it will be easier or harder for them to achieve the American Dream?” Much easier, 13 percent; somewhat easier, 21 percent; somewhat harder, 30 percent; much harder, 29 percent; about the same (volunteered), 3 percent; don’t know/refused, 3 percent.

Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation/*Washington Post*/Harvard University, poll, June 18–July 7, 2008. Text of question: “I’d like to talk to you now about a term with which you are probably familiar: the American Dream. How close are you to achieving the American Dream—are you very close, somewhat close, somewhat far, or very far?” Very close, 8 percent; somewhat close, 35 percent; somewhat far, 27 percent; very far, 23 percent; already achieved it (volunteered), 4 percent; don’t know what that is (volunteered), 1 percent; don’t know, 2 percent.

Opinion Research Corporation, poll, October 13–15, 2006. Text of question: “Do you agree or disagree: The American Dream has become impossible for most people to achieve?” Agree, 54 percent; disagree, 45 percent; don’t know/undecided/refused, 2 percent.

Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates, poll, June 19–29, 2008. Text of question: “I’m going to read you some possible definitions or descriptions of the American Dream, and for each one I’d like you to tell me if that’s very much what you understand the American Dream to mean, or sort of what it means, or not what it means. . . . To own a home.” Very much, 79 percent; sort of, 18 percent; not, 3 percent; don’t know, 1 percent.

Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates, poll, June 19–29, 2008. Text of question: “Is it likely your children will achieve the American Dream?” Yes, 69 percent; no, 20 percent; don’t know/no answer, 10 percent.

Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates, poll, June 19–29, 2008. Text of question: “Which is closer to your view? I have set goals for my life that once reached will mean that I have achieved the American Dream. The American Dream is a never-ending pursuit [and] I can always do more to achieve it.” I have set goals for my life that once reached will mean that I have achieved the American Dream, 13 percent; the American Dream is a never-ending pursuit [and] I can always do more to achieve it, 84 percent; don’t know/no answer, 3 percent.

Roper Organization, poll, November 1938. Text of question: “Do you believe there should be a top limit of income and that anyone getting over that limit should be compelled to turn the excess back to the Government as taxes?” Yes, 30 percent; no, 61 percent; don’t know, 9 percent.

- Time*/Abt SRBI, poll, April 1–5, 2009. Text of question: “People sometimes talk about the American Dream, that is the ability of all Americans to achieve their goals in life through hard work. Would you say that it’s going to be easier or harder for Americans to achieve the American Dream in ten years than it is today, or that things won’t change much?” Easier, 13 percent; harder, 57 percent; won’t change much, 24 percent; no answer/don’t know, 5 percent.
- Wall Street Journal*, poll, October 1986. Text of question: “I’m going to read you some possible definitions or descriptions of the American Dream, and for each one I’d like you to tell me if that’s very much what you understand the American Dream to mean, or sort of what it means, or not what it means. . . . To be able to get a high school education.” Very much, 84 percent; sort of, 11 percent; not, 4 percent.
- Zogby International, poll, May 12–14, 2008. Text of question: “Do you believe that the American Dream is as attainable today as it was eight years ago?” Yes, 24 percent; no, 75 percent; not sure, 2 percent.

References

- Adams, J. T. 1941. *The epic of America*. Garden City, NY: Blue Ribbon Books.
- Alter, J. 2006. *The defining moment: FDR’s hundred days and the triumph of hope*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Chesterton, G. K. 1922. *What I saw in America*. New York: Dodd, Mead.
- Dionne, E. J., Jr. 1987. Biden, offering a 1988 vision, says American Dream is evaporating. *New York Times*, May 15.
- Ehrenreich, B. 2005. *Bait and switch*. New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt.
- Fox, J. 2009. *Nope, no jobs here*. October 2. Message posted to <http://curiouscapitalist.blogs.time.com/2009/10/02.nope-no-jobs-here>.
- Hart, M. 1959. *Act one: An autobiography*. New York: Random House.
- Jillson, C. 2004. *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and exclusion over four centuries*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Kamp, D. 2009. Rethinking the American Dream. *Vanity Fair*, April. Available at www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2009/04/american-dream200904.
- Lane, R. 1962. *Political ideology: Why the common man believe what he does*. New York: Free Press.
- Malcolm, A. H. 1987. What five families did after losing the farm. *New York Times*, February 4.
- Moen, P., and P. Roehling. 2005. *The career mystic: Cracks in the American Dream*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Obama, B. 2006. *The audacity of hope: Thoughts on reclaiming the American Dream*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- . 2008. Acceptance speech. Democratic National Convention, Denver, Colorado, August 28.

- . 2009. Inaugural address. Washington, D.C., January 20.
- Reich, E. 1904. *Success among the nation*. New York: Harper.
- Roosevelt, F. D. 1936. Acceptance speech. Democratic National Convention, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, June 27. Available at www.2austin.cc.tx.us/1patrick/his2341/fdr36acceptancespeech.htm.
- Seelye, K. Q. 2009. What happens to the American Dream in a recession? *New York Times*, May 8.
- Tocqueville, A. de. 1989. *Democracy in America*. Vol. II. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- White, J. K. 1990. *The new politics of old values*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- Wills, G. 1978. *Inventing America*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Wolfe, A. 1998. *One nation after all*. New York: Viking.