

VANITY FAIR

THE WAY WE WERE



Closing a Summer Cottage, Quogue, New York, a 1957 Norman Rockwell art-directed Colorama by Ralph Amdursky and Charles Baker. © 2009 Kodak, courtesy of George Eastman House. The photographs in this article are [Kodak Coloramas](#) that were exhibited at New York's Grand Central Terminal from 1950 to 1990. [Enlarge this photo.](#)

Rethinking the American Dream

Along with millions of jobs and 401(k)s, the concept of a shared national ideal is said to be dying. But is the American Dream really endangered, or has it simply been misplaced? Exploring the way our aspirations have changed—the rugged individualism of the Wild West, the social compact of F.D.R., the sitcom fantasy of 50s suburbia—the author shows how the American Dream came to mean fame and fortune, instead of the promise that shaped a nation.

by **DAVID KAMP** April 2009

The year was 1930, a down one like this one. But for Moss Hart, it was the time for his particularly American moment of triumph. He had grown up poor in the outer boroughs of New York City—“the grim smell of actual want always at the end of my nose,” he said—and he’d vowed that if he ever made it big he would never again ride the rattling trains of the city’s dingy subway system. Now he was 25, and his first play, *Once in a Lifetime*, had just opened to raves on Broadway. And so, with three newspapers under his arm and a wee-hours celebration of a successful opening night behind him, he hailed a cab and took a long, leisurely sunrise ride back to the apartment in Brooklyn where he still lived with his parents and brother.

Crossing the Brooklyn Bridge into one of the several drab tenement neighborhoods that preceded his own, Hart later recalled, “I stared through the taxi window at a pinch-faced 10-year-old hurrying down the steps on some morning errand before school, and I thought of myself hurrying down the street on so many gray mornings out of a doorway and a house much the same as this one.... 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

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credential the city asked was the boldness to dream.”

As the boy ducked into a tailor shop, Hart recognized that this narrative was not exclusive to his “wonderful city”—it was one that could happen anywhere in, and only in, America. “A surge of shamefaced patriotism overwhelmed me,” Hart wrote in his memoir, *Act One*. “I might have been watching a victory parade on a flag-draped Fifth Avenue instead of the mean streets of a city slum. A feeling of patriotism, however, is not always limited to the feverish emotions called forth by war. It can sometimes be felt as profoundly and perhaps more truly at a moment such as this.”

Hart, like so many before and after him, was overcome by the power of the American Dream. As a people, we Americans are unique in having such a thing, a more or less Official National Dream. (There is no correspondingly stirring Canadian Dream or Slovakian Dream.) It is part of our charter—as articulated in the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, in the famous bit about “certain unalienable Rights” that include “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”—and it is what makes our country and our way of life attractive and magnetic to people in other lands.

But now fast-forward to the year 2009, the final Friday of January. The new president is surveying the dire economy he has been charged with righting—600,000 jobs lost in January alone, a gross domestic product that shrank 3.8 percent in the final quarter of 2008, the worst contraction in almost 30 years. Assessing these numbers, Barack Obama, a man who normally exudes hopefulness for a living, pronounces them a “continuing disaster for America’s working families,” a disaster that amounts to no less, he says, than “the American Dream in reverse.”

In reverse. Imagine this in terms of Hart’s life: out of the taxicab, back on the subway, back to the tenements, back to cramped cohabitation with Mom and Dad, back to gray mornings and the grim smell of actual want.

You probably don’t even have to imagine, for chances are that of late you have experienced some degree of reversal yourself, or at the very least have had friends or loved ones get laid off, lose their homes, or just find themselves forced to give up certain perks and amenities (restaurant meals, cable TV, salon haircuts) that were taken for granted as recently as a year ago.

These are tough times for the American Dream. As the safe routines of our lives have come undone, so has our characteristic optimism—not only our belief that the future is full of limitless possibility, but our faith that things will eventually return to normal, whatever “normal” was before the recession hit. There is even worry that the dream may be over—that we currently living Americans are the unfortunate ones who shall bear witness to that deflating moment in history when the promise of this country began to wither. This is the “sapping of confidence” that President Obama alluded to in his inaugural address, the “nagging fear that America’s decline is inevitable, and that the next generation must lower its sights.”

But let’s face it: If Moss Hart, like so many others, was able to rally from the depths of the Great Depression, then surely the viability of the American Dream isn’t in question. What needs to change is our expectation of what the dream promises—and our understanding of what that vague and promiscuously used term, “the American Dream,” is really supposed to mean.

In recent years, the term has often been interpreted to mean “making it big” or “striking it rich.” (As the cult of Brian De Palma’s *Scarface* has grown, so, disturbingly, has the number of people with a literal, celebratory read on its tagline: “He loved the American Dream. With a vengeance.”) Even when the phrase isn’t

being used to describe the accumulation of great wealth, it's frequently deployed to denote extreme success of some kind or other. Last year, I heard commentators say that Barack Obama achieved the American Dream by getting elected president, and that Philadelphia Phillies manager Charlie Manuel achieved the American Dream by leading his team to its first World Series title since 1980.

Yet there was never any promise or intimation of extreme success in the book that popularized the term, *The Epic of America*, by James Truslow Adams, published by Little, Brown and Company in 1931. (Yes, "the American Dream" is a surprisingly recent coinage; you'd think that these words would appear in the writings of Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin, but they don't.) For a book that has made such a lasting contribution to our vocabulary, *The Epic of America* is an offbeat piece of work—a sweeping, essayistic, highly subjective survey of this country's development from Columbus's landfall onward, written by a respected but solemn historian whose prim prose style was mocked as "spinach" by the waggish theater critic Alexander Woollcott.

But it's a smart, thoughtful treatise. Adams's goal wasn't so much to put together a proper history of the U.S. as to determine, by tracing his country's path to prominence, what makes this land so unlike other nations, so uniquely *American*. (That he undertook such an enterprise when he did, in the same grim climate in which Hart wrote *Once in a Lifetime*, reinforces how indomitably strong Americans' faith in their country remained during the Depression.) What Adams came up with was a construct he called "that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank."

From the get-go, Adams emphasized the egalitarian nature of this dream. It started to take shape, he said, with the Puritans who fled religious persecution in England and settled New England in the 17th century. "[Their] migration was not like so many earlier ones in history, led by warrior lords with followers dependent on them," he wrote, "but was one in which the common man as well as the leader was hoping for greater freedom and happiness for himself and his children."

The Declaration of Independence took this concept even further, for it compelled the well-to-do upper classes to put the common man on an equal footing with them where human rights and self-governance were concerned—a nose-holding concession that Adams captured with exquisite comic passiveness in the sentence, "It had been found necessary to base the [Declaration's] argument at last squarely on the rights of man." Whereas the colonist upper classes were asserting their independence from the British Empire, "the lower classes were thinking not only of that," Adams wrote, "but of their relations to their colonial legislatures and governing class."



Children's Parade (1970), by Lee Howick. © 2009 Kodak, courtesy of George Eastman House. [Enlarge this photo.](#)

America was truly a new world, a place where one could live one's life and pursue one's goals unburdened by older societies' prescribed ideas of class, caste, and social hierarchy. Adams was unreserved in his wonderment over this fact. Breaking from his formal tone, he shifted into first-person mode in *The Epic of America's* epilogue, noting a French guest's remark that his most striking impression of the United States was "the way that everyone of every sort looks you right in the eye, without a thought of inequality." Adams also told a story of "a foreigner" he used to employ as an assistant, and how he and this foreigner fell into a habit of chitchatting for a bit after their day's work was done. "Such a relationship was the great difference between America and his homeland," Adams wrote. "There, he said, 'I would do my work and might get a pleasant word, but I could never sit and talk like this. There is a difference there between social grades which cannot be got over. I would not talk to you there as man to man, but as my employer.'"

Anecdotal as these examples are, they get to the crux of the American Dream as Adams saw it: that life in the United States offered personal liberties and opportunities to a degree unmatched by any other country in history—a circumstance that remains true today, some ill-considered clampdowns in the name of Homeland Security notwithstanding. This invigorating sense of possibility, though it is too often taken for granted, is the great gift of Americanness. Even Adams underestimated it. Not above the prejudices of his time, he certainly never saw Barack Obama's presidency coming. While he correctly anticipated the eventual assimilation of the millions of Eastern and Southern European immigrants who arrived in the early 20th century to work in America's factories, mines, and sweatshops, he entertained no such hopes for black people. Or, as he rather injudiciously put it, "After a generation or two, [the white-ethnic laborers] can be absorbed, whereas the negro cannot."

It's also worth noting that Adams did not deny that there is a material component to the American Dream. *The Epic of America* offers several variations on Adams's definition of the dream (e.g., "the American dream that life should be made richer and fuller for everyone and opportunity remain open to all"), but the word "richer" appears in all of them, and he wasn't just talking about richness of experience. Yet Adams was careful not to overstate what the dream promises. In one of his final iterations of the "American Dream" trope, he described it as "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."

That last part—"according to his ability or achievement"—is the tempering phrase, a shrewd bit of expectations management. A "better and richer life" is promised, but for most people this won't be a *rich person's* life. "Opportunity for each" is promised, but within the bounds of each person's ability; the reality is, some people will realize the American Dream more stupendously and significantly than others. (For example, while President Obama is correct in saying, "Only in America is my story possible," this does not make it true that anyone in America can be the next Obama.) Nevertheless, the American Dream is within reach for all those who aspire to it and are willing to put in the hours; Adams was articulating it as an attainable outcome, not as a pipe dream.

As the phrase "the American Dream" insinuated its way into the lexicon, its meaning continuously morphed and shifted, reflecting the hopes and wants of the day. Adams, in *The Epic of America*, noted that one such major shift had already occurred in the republic's history, before he'd given the dream its name. In 1890, the U.S. Census Bureau declared that there was no longer such a thing as the American frontier. This was not an official pronouncement but an observation in the bureau's report that "the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line."

The tapering off of the frontier era put an end to the immature, individualistic, Wild West version of the American Dream, the one that had animated homesteaders, prospectors, wildcatters, and railroad men. “For a century and more,” Adams wrote, “our successive ‘Wests’ had dominated the thoughts of the poor, the restless, the discontented, the ambitious, as they had those of business expansionists and statesmen.”

But by the time Woodrow Wilson became president, in 1913—after the first national election in which every voter in the continental U.S. cast his ballot as a citizen of an established state—that vision had become passé. In fact, to hear the new president speak, the frontiersman’s version of the American Dream was borderline malevolent. Speaking in his inaugural address as if he had just attended a screening of *There Will Be Blood*, Wilson declared, “We have squandered a great part of what we might have used, and have not stopped to conserve the exceeding bounty of nature, without which our genius for enterprise would have been worthless and impotent.” Referencing both the end of the frontier and the rapid industrialization that arose in its aftermath, Wilson said, “There has been something crude and heartless and unfeeling in our haste to succeed and be great.... We have come now to the sober second thought. The scales of heedlessness have fallen from our eyes. We have made up our minds to square every process of our national life again with the standards we so proudly set up at the beginning.”

The American Dream was maturing into a shared dream, a societal compact that reached its apotheosis when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was sworn into office in 1933 and began implementing the New Deal. A “better and richer and fuller” life was no longer just what America promised its hardworking citizens individually; it was an ideal toward which these citizens were duty-bound to strive together. The Social Security Act of 1935 put this theory into practice. It mandated that workers and their employers contribute, via payroll taxes, to federally administered trust funds that paid out benefits to retirees—thereby introducing the idea of a “safe old age” with built-in protection from penury.

This was, arguably, the first time that a specific material component was ascribed to the American Dream, in the form of a guarantee that you could retire at the age of 65 and rest assured that your fellow citizens had your back. On January 31, 1940, a hardy Vermonter named Ida May Fuller, a former legal secretary, became the very first retiree to receive a monthly Social Security benefit check, which totaled \$22.54. As if to prove both the best hopes of Social Security’s proponents and the worst fears of its detractors, Fuller enjoyed a long retirement, collecting benefits all the way to her death in 1975, when she was 100 years old.



Family Romp in the Living Room (1959), by Lee Howick. © 2009 Kodak, courtesy of George Eastman House. [Enlarge this photo.](#)





Camping at Lake Placid (1959), by Herb Archer. © 2009 Kodak, courtesy of George Eastman House. [Enlarge this photo.](#)

Still, the American Dream, in F.D.R.'s day, remained largely a set of deeply held ideals rather than a checklist of goals or entitlements. When Henry Luce published his famous essay "The American Century" in *Life* magazine in February 1941, he urged that the U.S. should no longer remain on the sidelines of World War II but use its might to promote this country's "love of freedom, a feeling for the equality of opportunity, a tradition of self-reliance and independence, and also of cooperation." Luce was essentially proposing that the American Dream—more or less as Adams had articulated it—serve as a global advertisement for our way of life, one to which non-democracies should be converted, whether by force or gentle coercion. (He *was* a missionary's son.)

More soberly and less bombastically, Roosevelt, in his 1941 State of the Union address, prepared America for war by articulating the "four essential human freedoms" that the U.S. would be fighting for: "freedom of speech and expression"; "freedom of every person to worship God in his own way"; "freedom from want"; and "freedom from fear." Like Luce, Roosevelt was upholding the American way as a model for other nations to follow—he suffixed each of these freedoms with the phrase "everywhere in the world"—but he presented the four freedoms not as the lofty principles of a benevolent super race but as the homespun, bedrock values of a good, hardworking, unextravagant people.

No one grasped this better than Norman Rockwell, who, stirred to action by Roosevelt's speech, set to work on his famous "Four Freedoms" paintings: the one with the rough-hewn workman speaking his piece at a town meeting (*Freedom of Speech*); the one with the old lady praying in the pew (*Freedom of Worship*); the one with the Thanksgiving dinner (*Freedom from Want*); and the one with the young parents looking in on their sleeping children (*Freedom from Fear*). These paintings, first reproduced in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1943, proved enormously popular, so much so that the original works were commandeered for a national tour that raised \$133 million in U.S. war bonds, while the Office of War Information printed up four million poster copies for distribution.

Whatever your opinion of Rockwell (and I'm a fan), the resonance of the "Four Freedoms" paintings with wartime Americans offers tremendous insight into how U.S. citizens viewed their idealized selves. *Freedom from Want*, the most popular of all, is especially telling, for the scene it depicts is joyous but defiantly unostentatious. There is a happily gathered family, there are plain white curtains, there is a large turkey, there are some celery stalks in a dish, and there is a bowl of fruit, but there is not a hint of overabundance, overindulgence, elaborate table settings, ambitious seasonal centerpieces, or any other conventions of modern-day shelter-mag porn.

It was freedom *from* want, not freedom *to* want—a world away from the idea that the patriotic thing to do in tough times is go shopping. Though the germ of that idea would form shortly, not long after the war ended.

William J. Levitt was a Seabee in the Pacific theater during the war, a member of one of the Construction Battalions (CBs) of the U.S. Navy. One of his jobs was to build airfields as fast as possible, on the cheap. Levitt had already worked in his father's construction business back home, and he held an option on a thousand acres of potato fields in Hempstead, New York, out on Long Island. Coming back from the war with newly acquired speed-building skills and a vision of all those returning G.I.'s needing homes, he set to work on turning those potato fields into the first Levittown.

Levitt had the forces of history and demographics on his side. The G.I. Bill, enacted in 1944, at the tail end of the New Deal, offered returning veterans low-interest loans with no money down to purchase a house—an ideal scenario, coupled with a severe housing shortage and a boom in young families, for the rapid-fire development of suburbia.

The first Levitt houses, built in 1947, had two bedrooms, one bathroom, a living room, a kitchen, and an unfinished loft attic that could theoretically be converted into another bedroom. The houses had no basements or garages, but they sat on lots of 60 by 100 feet, and—McMansionistas, take note—took up only 12 percent of their lot's footprint. They cost about \$8,000.

“Levittown” is today a byword for creepy suburban conformity, but Bill Levitt, with his Henry Ford-like acumen for mass production, played a crucial role in making home ownership a new tenet of the American Dream, especially as he expanded his operations to other states and inspired imitators. From 1900 to 1940, the percentage of families who lived in homes that they themselves owned held steady at around 45 percent. But by 1950 this figure had shot up to 55 percent, and by 1960 it was at 62 percent. Likewise, the homebuilding business, severely depressed during the war, revived abruptly at war's end, going from 114,000 new single-family houses started in 1944 to 937,000 in 1946—and to 1.7 million in 1950.

Levitt initially sold his houses only to vets, but this policy didn't hold for long; demand for a new home of one's own wasn't remotely limited to ex-G.I.'s, as the Hollywood filmmaker Frank Capra was astute enough to note in *It's a Wonderful Life*. In 1946, a full year before the first Levittown was populated, Capra's creation George Bailey (played by Jimmy Stewart) cut the ribbon on his own eponymous suburban-tract development, Bailey Park, and his first customer wasn't a war veteran but a hardworking Italian immigrant, the tremulously grateful saloonkeeper Mr. Martini. (An overachiever, Capra was both a war veteran *and* a hardworking Italian immigrant.)

Buttressed by postwar optimism and prosperity, the American Dream was undergoing another recalibration. Now it really did translate into specific goals rather than Adams's more broadly defined aspirations. Home ownership was the fundamental goal, but, depending on who was doing the dreaming, the package might also include car ownership, television ownership (which multiplied from 6 million to 60 million sets in the U.S. between 1950 and 1960), and the intent to send one's kids to college. The G.I. Bill was as crucial on that last count as it was to the housing boom. In providing tuition money for returning vets, it not only stocked the universities with new students—in 1947, roughly half of the nation's college enrollees were ex-G.I.'s—but put the very idea of college within reach of a generation that had previously considered higher education the exclusive province of the rich and the extraordinarily gifted. Between 1940 and 1965, the number of U.S. adults who had completed at least four years of college more than doubled.

Nothing reinforced the seductive pull of the new, suburbanized American Dream more than the burgeoning medium of television, especially as its production nexus shifted from New York, where the grubby, schlubby shows *The Honeymooners* and *The Phil Silvers Show* were shot, to Southern California, where the sprightly, twinkly shows *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Leave It to Beaver* were made. While the former shows are actually more enduringly watchable and funny, the latter were the foremost “family” sitcoms of the 1950s—and, as such, the aspirational touchstones of real American families.

The Nelsons (*Ozzie and Harriet*), the Andersons (*Father Knows Best*), and the Cleavers (*Leave It to Beaver*) lived in airy houses even nicer than those that Bill Levitt built. In fact, the Nelson home in *Ozzie and Harriet* was a faithful replica of the two-story Colonial in Hollywood where Ozzie, Harriet, David, and Ricky Nelson really lived when they weren’t filming their show. The Nelsons also offered, in David and especially the swoonsome, guitar-strumming Ricky, two attractive exemplars of that newly ascendant and clout-wielding American demographic, the teenager. “The postwar spread of American values would be spearheaded by the idea of the teenager,” writes Jon Savage somewhat ominously in *Teenage*, his history of youth culture. “This new type was pleasure-seeking, product-hungry, embodying the new global society where social inclusion was to be granted through purchasing power.”



Family Reunion (1970), by Norm Kerr. © 2009 Kodak, courtesy of George Eastman House. [Enlarge this photo.](#)



Voting Day in Clarkson, New York (1960), by Bob Phillips. © 2009 Kodak, courtesy of George Eastman House. [Enlarge this photo.](#)

Still, the American Dream was far from degenerating into the consumerist nightmare it would later become (or, more precisely, become mistaken for). What’s striking about the *Ozzie and Harriet*-style 50s dream is its relative modesty of scale. Yes, the TV and advertising portrayals of family life were antiseptic and too-too-perfect, but the dream homes, real and fictional, seem downright dowdy to modern eyes, with none of the “great room” pretensions and tricked-out kitchen islands that were to come.

Nevertheless, some social critics, such as the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, were already fretful. In his 1958 book *The Affluent Society*, a best-seller, Galbraith posited that America had reached an almost unsurpassable and unsustainable degree of mass affluence because the average family owned a home, one car, and one TV. In pursuing these goals, Galbraith said, Americans had lost a sense of their priorities, focusing on consumerism at the expense of public-sector needs like parks, schools, and infrastructure maintenance. At the same time, they had lost their parents' Depression-era sense of thrift, blithely taking out personal loans or enrolling in installment plans to buy their cars and refrigerators.

While these concerns would prove prescient, Galbraith severely underestimated the potential for average U.S. household income and spending power to grow further. The very same year that *The Affluent Society* came out, Bank of America introduced the BankAmericard, the forerunner to Visa, today the most widely used credit card in the world.

What unfolded over the next generation was the greatest standard-of-living upgrade that this country had ever experienced: an economic sea change powered by the middle class's newly sophisticated engagement in personal finance via credit cards, mutual funds, and discount brokerage houses—and its willingness to take on debt.

Consumer credit, which had already rocketed upward from \$2.6 billion to \$45 billion in the postwar period (1945 to 1960), shot up to \$105 billion by 1970. “It was as if the entire middle class was betting that tomorrow would be better than today,” as the financial writer Joe Nocera put it in his 1994 book, *A Piece of the Action: How the Middle Class Joined the Money Class*. “Thus did Americans begin to spend money they didn't yet have; thus did the unaffordable become affordable. And thus, it must be said, did the economy grow.”

Before it spiraled out of control, the “money revolution,” to use Nocera's term for this great middle-class financial engagement, really did serve the American Dream. It helped make life “better and richer and fuller” for a broad swath of the populace in ways that our Depression-era forebears could only have imagined.

To be glib about it, the Brady family's way of life was even sweeter than the Nelson family's. *The Brady Bunch*, which debuted in 1969, in *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet's* old Friday-night-at-eight slot on ABC, occupied the same space in the American psyche of the 70s as *Ozzie and Harriet* had in the 50s: as the middle class's American Dream wish-fulfillment fantasy, again in a generically idyllic Southern California setting. But now there were two cars in the driveway. Now there were annual vacations at the Grand Canyon and an improbably caper-filled trip to Hawaii. (The average number of airplane trips per American household, less than one per year in 1954, was almost three per year in 1970.) And the house itself was snazzier—that open-plan living area just inside the Brady home's entryway, with the “floating” staircase leading up to the bedrooms, was a major step forward in fake-nuclear-family living.

By 1970, for the first time, more than half of all U.S. families held at least one credit card. But usage was still relatively conservative: only 22 percent of cardholders carried a balance from one month's bill to the next. Even in the so-called go-go 80s, this figure hovered in the 30s, compared to 56 percent today. But it was in the 80s that the American Dream began to take on hyperbolic connotations, to be conflated with extreme success: wealth, basically. The representative TV families, whether benignly genteel (the Huxtables on *The Cosby Show*) or soap-opera bonkers (the Carringtons on *Dynasty*), were undeniably rich. “Who says you can't have it all?” went the jingle in a ubiquitous beer commercial from the era, which only got more alarming as it went on to ask, “Who says you can't have the world without losing your soul?”

The deregulatory atmosphere of the Reagan years—the loosening of strictures on banks and energy companies, the reining in of the Justice Department’s antitrust division, the removal of vast tracts of land from the Department of the Interior’s protected list—was, in a sense, a calculated regression to the immature, individualistic American Dream of yore; not for nothing did Ronald Reagan (and, later, far less effectively, George W. Bush) go out of his way to cultivate a frontiersman’s image, riding horses, chopping wood, and reveling in the act of clearing brush.

To some degree, this outlook succeeded in rallying middle-class Americans to seize control of their individual fates as never before—to “Go for it!,” as people in yellow ties and red braces were fond of saying at the time. In one of Garry Trudeau’s finest moments from the 80s, a *Doonisbury* character was shown watching a political campaign ad in which a woman concluded her pro-Reagan testimonial with the tagline “Ronald Reagan ... because I’m worth it.”

But this latest recalibration saw the American Dream get decoupled from any concept of the common good (the movement to privatize Social Security began to take on momentum) and, more portentously, from the concepts of working hard and managing one’s expectations. You only had to walk as far as your mailbox to discover that you’d been “pre-approved” for six new credit cards, and that the credit limits on your existing cards had been raised without your even asking. Never before had money been freer, which is to say, never before had taking on debt become so guiltless and seemingly consequence-free—at both the personal and institutional levels. President Reagan added \$1 trillion to the national debt, and in 1986, the United States, formerly the world’s biggest creditor nation, became the world’s biggest debtor nation. Perhaps debt was the new frontier.

A curious phenomenon took hold in the 1990s and 2000s. Even as the easy credit continued, and even as a sustained bull market cheered investors and papered over the coming mortgage and credit crises that we now face, Americans were losing faith in the American Dream—or whatever it was they believed the American Dream to be. A CNN poll taken in 2006 found that more than half of those surveyed, 54 percent, considered the American Dream unachievable—and CNN noted that the numbers were nearly the same in a 2003 poll it had conducted. Before that, in 1995, a *Business Week*/Harris poll found that two-thirds of those surveyed believed the American Dream had become harder to achieve in the past 10 years, and three-fourths believed that achieving the dream would be harder still in the upcoming 10 years.

To the writer Gregg Easterbrook, who at the beginning of this decade was a visiting fellow in economics at the Brookings Institution, this was all rather puzzling, because, by the definition of any prior American generation, the American Dream had been more fully realized by more people than ever before. While acknowledging that an obscene amount of America’s wealth was concentrated in the hands of a small group of ultra-rich, Easterbrook noted that “the bulk of the gains in living standards—the gains that really matter—have occurred below the plateau of wealth.”

By nearly every measurable indicator, Easterbrook pointed out in 2003, life for the average American had gotten better than it used to be. Per capita income, adjusted for inflation, had more than doubled since 1960. Almost 70 percent of Americans owned the places they lived in, versus under 20 percent a century earlier. Furthermore, U.S. citizens averaged 12.3 years of education, tops in the world and a length of time in school once reserved solely for the upper class.





The Old Swimming Hole, Scottsville, New York (1953), by Herb Archer. © 2009 Kodak, courtesy of George Eastman House. [Enlarge this photo.](#)



Teen Dance in Basement Recreation Room (1961), by Lee Howick and Neil Montanus. © 2009 Kodak, courtesy of George Eastman House. [Enlarge this photo.](#)

Yet when Easterbrook published these figures in a book, the book was called *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*. He was paying attention not only to the polls in which people complained that the American Dream was out of reach, but to academic studies by political scientists and mental-health experts that detected a marked uptick since the midcentury in the number of Americans who considered themselves unhappy.

The American Dream was now almost by definition unattainable, a moving target that eluded people's grasp; nothing was ever enough. It compelled Americans to set unmeetable goals for themselves and then consider themselves failures when these goals, inevitably, went unmet. In examining why people were thinking this way, Easterbrook raised an important point. "For at least a century," he wrote, "Western life has been dominated by a revolution of rising expectations: Each generation expected more than its antecedent. Now most Americans and Europeans already have what they need, in addition to considerable piles of stuff they don't need."

This might explain the existential ennui of the well-off, attractive, solipsistic kids on *Laguna Beach* (2004–6) and *The Hills* (2006–9), the MTV reality soaps that represent the curdling of the whole Southern California wish-fulfillment genre on television. Here were affluent beach-community teens enriching themselves further not even by acting or working in any real sense, but by allowing themselves to be filmed as they sat by campfires mauding on about, like, how much their lives suck.

In the same locale that begat these programs, Orange County, there emerged a Bill Levitt of McMansions, an Iranian-born entrepreneur named Hadi Makarechian whose company, Capital Pacific Holdings, specializes in building tract-housing developments for multi-millionaires, places with names like Saratoga Cove and Ritz Pointe. In a 2001 profile of Makarechian in *The New Yorker*, David Brooks mentioned that the builder had run

into zoning restrictions on his latest development, called Oceanfront, that prevented the “entry statement”—the walls that mark the entrance to the development—from being any higher than four feet. Noted Brooks drolly, “The people who are buying homes in Oceanfront are miffed about the small entry statement.” Nothing was ever enough.

An extreme example, perhaps, but not misrepresentative of the national mind-set. It says a lot about our buying habits and constant need for new, better stuff that Congress and the Federal Communications Commission were utterly comfortable with setting a hard 2009 date for the switchover from analog to digital television broadcasting—pretty much assuming that every American household owns or will soon own a flat-panel digital TV—even though such TVs have been widely available for only *five years*. (As recently as January 2006, just 20 percent of U.S. households owned a digital television, and the average price point for such a television was still above a thousand dollars.)

In hewing to the misbegotten notion that our standard of living must trend inexorably upward, we entered in the late 90s and early 00s into what might be called the Juiceball Era of the American Dream—a time of steroidally outsize purchasing and artificially inflated numbers. As Easterbrook saw it, it was no longer enough for people to keep up with the Joneses; no, now they had to “call and raise the Joneses.”

“Bloated houses,” he wrote, “arise from a desire to call-and-raise-the-Joneses—surely not from a belief that a seven-thousand-square-foot house that comes right up against the property setback line would be an ideal place in which to dwell.” More ominously and to the point: “To call-and-raise-the-Joneses, Americans increasingly take on debt.”

This personal debt, coupled with mounting institutional debt, is what has got us in the hole we’re in now. While it remains a laudable proposition for a young couple to secure a low-interest loan for the purchase of their first home, the more recent practice of running up huge credit-card bills to pay for, well, *whatever*, has come back to haunt us. The amount of outstanding consumer debt in the U.S. has gone up every year since 1958, and up an astonishing 22 percent since 2000 alone. The financial historian and *V.F.* contributor Niall Ferguson reckons that the over-leveraging of America has become especially acute in the last 10 years, with the U.S.’s debt burden, as a proportion of the gross domestic product, “in the region of 355 percent,” he says. “So, debt is *three and a half times* the output of the economy. That’s some kind of historic maximum.”

James Truslow Adams’s words remind us that we’re still fortunate to live in a country that offers us such latitude in choosing how we go about our lives and work—even in this crapola economy. Still, we need to challenge some of the middle-class orthodoxies that have brought us to this point—not least the notion, widely promulgated throughout popular culture, that the middle class itself is a soul-suffocating dead end.

The middle class is a good place to be, and, optimally, where most Americans will spend their lives if they work hard and don’t over-extend themselves financially. On *American Idol*, Simon Cowell has done a great many youngsters a great service by telling them that they’re *not* going to Hollywood and that they should find some other line of work. The American Dream is not fundamentally about stardom or extreme success; in recalibrating our expectations of it, we need to appreciate that it is not an all-or-nothing deal—that it is not, as in hip-hop narratives and in Donald Trump’s brain, a stark choice between the penthouse and the streets.

And what about the outmoded proposition that each successive generation in the United States must live better than the one that preceded it? While this idea is still crucial to families struggling in poverty and to immigrants who’ve arrived here in search of a better life than that they left behind, it’s no longer applicable to an American

middle class that lives more comfortably than any version that came before it. (Was this not one of the cautionary messages of the most thoughtful movie of 2008, *WALL-E*?) I'm no champion of downward mobility, but the time has come to consider the idea of simple *continuity*: the perpetuation of a contented, sustainable middle-class way of life, where the standard of living remains happily constant from one generation to the next.

This is not a matter of any generation's having to "lower its sights," to use President Obama's words, nor is it a denial that some children of lower- and middle-class parents will, through talent and/or good fortune, strike it rich and bound precipitously into the upper class. Nor is it a moony, nostalgic wish for a return to the scrappy 30s or the suburban 50s, because any sentient person recognizes that there's plenty about the good old days that wasn't so good: the original Social Security program pointedly excluded farmworkers and domestics (i.e., poor rural laborers and minority women), and the original Levittown didn't allow black people in.

But those eras do offer lessons in scale and self-control. The American Dream should require hard work, but it should not require 80-hour workweeks and parents who never see their kids from across the dinner table. The American Dream should entail a first-rate education for every child, but not an education that leaves no extra time for the actual enjoyment of childhood. The American Dream should accommodate the goal of home ownership, but without imposing a lifelong burden of unmeetable debt. Above all, the American Dream should be embraced as the unique sense of possibility that this country gives its citizens—the decent chance, as Moss Hart would say, to scale the walls and achieve what you wish.



Little League Game, Fairport, New York (1957), by Herb Archer. © 2009 Kodak, courtesy of George Eastman House. [Enlarge this photo.](#)

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