A Better Life: Creating the American Dream

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

Introduction

1 The American dream is like a familiar old tune that we can all hum, but when we get to the lyrics no one can agree on all the words. We sing this national anthem in fragments. Ask 10 people about the American dream and you get 10 variations on a theme.

2 Nonetheless, the theme is fundamental. It's the belief that in the United States, people are free to pursue opportunity, and that through hard work, they can make a better life for themselves and their children.

3 This dream has powered the hopes and aspirations of Americans for generations. It's a dream that began as a plain but revolutionary notion: each person has the right to pursue happiness—not as self-indulgence, but as fair ambition and creative drive.

4 Over time however, that deceptively simple notion has yielded something else: a powerful set of consumer expectations. When Americans today talk about the American dream, they're often referring to a lifestyle that includes owning a house and a car, sending kids to college, and enjoying a comfortable retirement.

The economic boom after World War II produced a rise in mass consumption. This ad invites consumers to enjoy the glamour of a modern refrigerator. Fabulous Foodarama advertisement used with permission of Electrolux.

Kate Ellis and Ellen Guettler. "A Better Life: Creating the American Dream." American Public Media, 2009.
https://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/americandream/a1.html

Part 1: Roots of the American Dream

5 Centuries before the "American dream" became a standard phrase, immigrants and observers knew what it was. The ideals that undergird the American dream were formed early in the nation's history. Jim Cullen, author of *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, writes:

> The Pilgrims may not have actually talked about the American dream, but they would have understood the idea: after all, they lived it as people who imagined a destiny for themselves. So did the Founding Fathers. So did illiterate immigrants who could not speak English but who intuitively expressed rhythms of the Dream with their hands and their hearts. What Alexis de Tocqueville called 'the charm of anticipated success' in his classic *Democracy in America* seemed palpable to him not only in the 1830s, but in his understanding of American history for two hundred years before that.

Immigrants arriving at the Immigrant Building, Ellis Island, New York Harbor, 1904. Library of Congress. In the public domain.

6 This expansive belief in possibility—"the charm of anticipated success"—is deeply embedded in the nation's psyche. It's a compelling message political leaders call on when the nation is in crisis, reminding Americans of their can-do spirit, that individuals have the power to bring about change.

7 Perhaps it's no coincidence that historian James Truslow Adams coined the phrase "American dream" during the depths of the Great Depression. A popular writer at the time, Adams wanted to write a history of the United States for the general reader, one that underscored what he saw as the nation's central historic theme: the American dream. In his book, *The Epic of America*, which was published in 1931, Adams describes that dream:

> [It] is a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement . . . It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable,

and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

8 Adams was careful to say the American dream was not just a desire for affluence, but historian David Farber says the term quickly came to include it. The American dream "became closely linked to material comfort, to the consumer abundance America was producing. 'A better life' started to connote not just an economically secure life, but an abundant life. So there's a kind of linkage between mobility, a better life, and the good stuff that would make it so."

Part 2: The Modern American Dream

9 The seeds of the modern expectations about the American dream were planted during the nation's biggest 20th century bust: the Great Depression. Early in his administration President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated a series of programs, the New Deal, to jumpstart the economy. Among the programs was the 1934 National Housing Act, designed to spur home construction and home ownership.

10 Home ownership was not common at the turn of the 20th century. Lizabeth Cohen, author of *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, says even upper middle-class people rented: "They didn't think they needed to buy a home to establish themselves."

11 To own a house back then, people normally had to save up virtually all the money they needed to buy it. If they got a mortgage it was for a short period of time and usually required at least half the purchase price. If a family did buy a home, it was often later in life. It was not a rite of passage into adulthood.

12 The New Deal began to change all that. "The Roosevelt administration saw home construction, and home ownership, and the buying of appliances and furniture for those homes as an important part of generating economic recovery," says Claude Fischer, co-author of *Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years*. So the government started to insure mortgages and encouraged stretching them over a longer period so the payments were more affordable. Likewise, the government expanded sewer systems, paved roads and in other ways created the infrastructure to support new housing.

13 According to Fischer, the National Housing Act worked. By 1940, home-ownership was on the rise.

Part 4: The American Dream Deferred

14 With the rise of suburban developments like Levittown came a whole new way of life as young families abandoned cramped housing in the city. "They lived not far from the malls, which

became new downtowns," Lizabeth Cohen told ARW. More and more, she says, "Important events in their lives, like getting married or having kids, were marked by purchases."

A row of Cape-Cod-style homes in Levittown, New York. Bettmann/Getty images.

15 But of course not everyone was able to buy a home in the suburbs. "Not everybody wanted this, and banks were very picky about who they gave mortgages to," says Cohen. The government unlocked the American dream for millions of veterans, but it often locked out African Americans by subsidizing suburban developments that barred black people.

16 "The government underwrote segregation," says sociologist Matt Lassiter. Indeed, starting with the Federal Housing Administration in 1934, the government refused to insure mortgages in communities "redlined" as poor or mainly minority. This effectively prevented blacks and other people of color from buying homes with an affordable mortgage, and moving up in life by getting out of the slums.

17 At the same time, by the start of the modern civil rights movement, African Americans were well aware of their power as consumers. The first major protest staged in the 1950s was, indeed, a consumer protest—that is, a boycott—against the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama.

18 Lizabeth Cohen explains: "As the civil rights movement played out, especially in the North, very often the sites of confrontation and sites of mobilization were sites of consumption. Black people felt their full participation as American citizens depended on being able to go into any restaurant and be served, to go into a department store and be able to try on clothes, and to buy a house in a suburb with good schools and not be steered to a community with a large African American population."

19 Cohen cautions against reducing the civil rights movement to a struggle for consumer equality. Still, she says, "Consumption was symbolic of full participation in American society, and this was increasingly a world defined by consumption. So it mattered to be able to participate fully."

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