



## World Cultures Blog

### Country Studies

November 7, 2009 3:43 PM by [matt piercy](#)

This is a spot for all the 7th grade to share helpful sites for our country studies. Please follow this format for ease.

Peru: <http://ecuador.iswhere.mrs.piercy.is/from/html>.

[33 comments](#)

#### Filter by Date

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#### Filter by Tag

è 7a

è 7b

è 7c

### The Mission

November 5, 2009 9:59 AM by [matt piercy](#)

#### Excellent Extra Credit Opportunity:



After watching the film, type me a response to the following questions:

*What is the role of the Spaniards in the film? The Portuguese? The Church? The Jesuits? The Guarani? How does this film portray each of these groups of people? Who are the heroes, the villains, the victims? With which group do you sympathize? How accurate do you think the film's portrayal of these*

*groups is?*

Enjoy!

[2 comments](#)

### Study Guide

October 23, 2009 7:25 AM by [matt piercy](#)

**When?** Wednesday, the 28th

**Why?** You will want to prepare yourself because the test is designed for you to show what you have learned the past couple months in social studies. It should take the full hour and fifteen minutes and being ready will make it so much more comfortable.

**What?** The Essential Questions

#### What else to do?

Study the map (the ones you drew + past test + ilike2learn)

Study your notes

Read past blogs

Re-watch videos

Ask specific questions (in class, before/after class, e-mail, or call me)

**YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR EVERYTHING WE HAVE WATCHED, READ, AND TALKED ABOUT :-)**

**The format and suggested time for each section of the test are as follows:**

**Map of North America (10 minutes)**

**Venn Diagram (5 minutes)**

**5 Short answer questions (15 minutes)**

**Surprise question (10 minutes)**

**Paragraph writing (35 minutes)**

**The Essential Questions:**

1. \*Where are the countries of North America and the States of the United States?
2. \* How has the U.S. changed in its short history? (immigration)
3. \* "How did we live more sustainably? Why should we? What habits/changes are necessary to move in a more sustainable direction? When did Americans (North, South, and Central Americans) move away from a sustainable way of living?
4. \* What is the American Dream? How has immigration to the U.S. looked over the years?
5. \* What is the culture of communism? (Cuba)
6. \* What could we learn from ancient cultures like the Aztecs and Mayas?
7. \* Consumerism—Remembering "the Barbi World." How balanced or imbalanced is the world in which we live? (looking at the U.S. and outward)

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Some of what we have done with North America that I encourage you to think more about:

- Maps—know the location and spelling of all the states, provinces, territories, and countries in North America (Canada, U.S., Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean)
- Pros and Cons of Immigration (specifically illegal immigration)
- Immigration cartoons
- Pros and Cons of Communism
- What is capitalism?
- History of immigration in United States (1700s, 1800s, 1900s, and 2000s). Reservations, immigration policy, who was coming, when, and why.
- Exploitation—know what it is and several examples
- Obsolescence—know what it is and several examples
- Maya—what we can learn from them
- The textbook
- Sustainability—what is it and how can we live more sustainably
- Consumerism
- The Story of Stuff video
- What the World Eats
- Consuming Kids video
- The Golden Door Documentary video
- Youths Dream of Baseball's Big Leagues in the Dominican Republic
- A Walk in Cuba (communism) video
- It's Toxic video
- I Pledge video
- Brainpop Communism
- Glumber Kinetic Sculpture video
- Climate Change—Reduce Your Carbon Footprint video
- The American Dream

 [5 comments](#)

## (7C) Exploitation

October 22, 2009 10:02 AM by [matt piercy](#)

**Due: Friday**

1. Write one original example of "exploitation" in our world.
2. Explain how this is "exploitation."
3. Comment specifically on one classmate that has not already been commented on. Please be honest and specific. And...remember, go deeper than the surface :-)

 [13 comments](#)

## (7B) Exploitation

October 22, 2009 2:28 PM by [matt piercy](#)

**Due: Friday**

1. Write one original example of "exploitation" in our world.
2. Explain how this is "exploitation."

**3. Comment specifically on one classmate that has not already been commented on.  
Please be honest and specific. And...remember, go deeper than the surface :-)**

**\*Sidenote: I know many of you were interested when we quickly talked about how Las Vegas is not a very sustainable city. Take a look at this article:**

<http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2008/sep/22/vegas-47th-50-urban-sustainability-ranking/>

 [15 comments](#)

## (7A) Exploitation

October 21, 2009 3:00 PM by [matt piercy](#)

**Due: Friday**

- 1. Write one original example of "exploitation" in our world.**
- 2. Explain how this is "exploitation."**
- 3. Comment specifically on one classmate that has not already been commented on.  
Please be honest and specific. And...remember, go deeper than the surface :-)**

 [17 comments](#)

## What My Family Eats Photo (7C, 7B, and 7A)

October 15, 2009 12:27 PM by [matt piercy](#)

Gather together what you think your family eats in an average week. Take a picture like the ones you saw in class (<http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1626519,00.html>). Speak with your parents about how food has changed since they were children. Last, either send me the picture (mpiercy@hpa.edu) and I will print it, or print it yourself. Have fun!

Due: Tuesday

 [2 comments](#)

## (7C) Obsolescence

October 14, 2009 6:44 AM by [matt piercy](#)

**Due Thursday :-)**

**Take a minimum of 20 minutes to respond to one of the following questions:**

**#1 Describe how something you own is part of planned obsolescence. What do you really know about this object? Where does it come from? How is it designed? Why might it be designed this way? Costs (in stores but also, actual costs)? What do YOU think about this?**

#2 Create a product where the object you manufacture and sell is based on planned obsolescence. This means it will either have a "life" as a result of the material used to make it (photos) or, the product is imperfect in some way. Create it so it only does 60-80% of what you may want it to do. Tell us about your product. Be creative!

 [14 comments](#)

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## (7A)Obsolescence

October 14, 2009 6:45 AMby [matt piercy](#)

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11 comments

## (7C) I Pledge

October 11, 2009 8:13 PMby [matt piercy](#)

What change are you willing to make? Big or small, pledge one thing you are going to do.

12 comments

## (7B) I Pledge

October 11, 2009 8:12 PMby [matt piercy](#)

What change are you willing to make? Big or small, pledge one thing you are going to do.

12 comments

## (7A) I Pledge

October 11, 2009 8:13 PMby [matt piercy](#)

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12 comments

## (All Classes) Immigration Debate

October 7, 2009 7:11 PMby [matt piercy](#)



You are not expected to read all of the websites and articles below but they may be helpful in preparing for the debate. PLEASE if in your research, you come across a helpful website or article, please post the link below. I also encourage you to write comments for others about what you learned. These comments hopefully will help other 7th graders in preparing for the debate. Thanks!

Remember, the debate is Friday. I am expecting you have facts to support your argument.

New article posted Wednesday night:

[http://blogs.chron.com/immigration/archives/2008/08/post\\_151.html](http://blogs.chron.com/immigration/archives/2008/08/post_151.html)

Beyond the Border

<http://www.pbs.org/itvs/beyondtheborder/immigration.html>

Sharp Rise in Chinese Arrests at U.S.Border

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-chinese-smuggling5-2009oct05,0,4972825.story>

Rules to Target Illegal Immigrants Worry Employers

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12612074>

Getting Paid Off the Books in America

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=8939277&ps=rs>

Illegal but Essential

<http://articles.latimes.com/2006/oct/01/business/fi-immigecon1>

## (7A) Final Piece of "Rethinking the American Dream"

October 6, 2009 12:26 PM by [matt piercy](#)

**SURVEY:** [http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=cSsX9TsC4bVlcljV7yNYkg\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=cSsX9TsC4bVlcljV7yNYkg_3d_3d)">Click

**Remember, your political cartoon. Find, copy, paste, and type beneath it, what you think the cartoonist is "saying". Also, type what you learned from this cartoon and your opinion. Make sure you run spell check. Due: Friday**

### BLOG:

1. Read final part (quiz Friday?)

2. Research a person who you think has lived the American Dream? On the blog, type a 5 sentence paragraph introducing us to this person and why you think they are the best example of the American Dream. Please be original and make sure the person you have chosen has not been written about yet. (Due: Friday)

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.

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 mauling 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.

 [15 comments](#)

## (7B) Final Piece of "Rethinking the American Dream"

September 30, 2009 2:25 PM by [matt piercy](#)

### 1. Read final part(quiz Friday?)

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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.

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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.)

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"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.

 [11 comments](#)

## (All Classes) The American Dream "reloaded"--Part III

September 27, 2009 8:27 PM by [matt piercy](#)

**Due: Wednesday, by class time**

1. Read Part III below

2. In **complete sentences**, please send me your responses ([mpiercy@hpa.edu](mailto:mpiercy@hpa.edu)) to these five questions. Please do NOT respond to this assignment on the blog nor hand me a paper with your responses.

1. In the 1950s, how did people now begin to afford more expensive items like cars and refrigerators?
2. How did the American Dream change from the 1950s to the 1970s (hint: Hawaii)?
3. What is debt?
4. What years was President Reagan president? (you need to look this up)
5. How much debt did the United States owe after President Reagan's presidency?

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 *Doonesbury* 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.

0 comments

## (7B) The America Dream-Part II

September 24, 2009 10:06 AM by [matt piercy](#)

Due: Friday, tomorrow



What: Type a thoughtful 5-sentence summary like you have learned. Remember, during and after reading, ask yourself, "What is the main idea?" After you have decided this, ask yourself, "What is my opinion about this." This can be your first sentence. Remember, make sure your third sentence ("This shows...") actually "shows".

My expectations:

Please remember my expectations:

- \*Learn new vocabulary
- \*Do not get frustrated
- \*Understand as much as you can
- \*Read more than once if it helps
- \*Ask specific questions (of your parents, of your friends, of me—[mpiercy@hpa.edu](mailto:mpiercy@hpa.edu)). I'm not the best mind reader so, if you don't ask any questions or ask for help, I think you understand everything. Please ask!

Part II:

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 'West' 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.

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.

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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."

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.

 [14 comments](#)

## (7C) The American Dream-Part II

September 24, 2009 10:07 AM by [matt piercy](#)

**Due: Friday, tomorrow**



**What:** Type a thoughtful 5-sentence summary like you have learned. Remember, during and after reading, ask yourself, "What is the main idea?" After you have decided this, ask yourself, "What is my opinion about this." This can be your first sentence. Remember, make sure your third sentence ("This shows...") actually "shows".

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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.”

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.

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