

# The Death of the American Dream

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i  
književnosti i pedagogije

Iva Pavlović

## **Smrt američkog sna**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

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## **Abstract**

This paper will focus on the decline of the American Dream and the reasons for its decline. The American Dream is dying because certain social and economic changes that have occurred in America have made it impossible for the majority of Americans to achieve their Dream. The original traditional American values gave rise to the development of the American Dream and the portrayal of America as ‘the land of opportunity.’ However, with time, the original values as well as the American Dream became corrupted. Americans lived the American Dream when America was at its peak but later unfavorable social and economic changes caused distress in the country and led to the loss of the spirit of the American Dream. Despite much pessimism, some Americans still believe in the spirit of the American Dream and hope that it can be restored in the future.

**Keywords:** The American Dream, values, death, America



## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to explore the development of the American Dream from its origins to the present in order to show its rise and decline with a particular emphasis on why fewer Americans believe in the American Dream. The American Dream is dying because social and economic inequality have made it impossible for the majority of Americans to achieve their Dream. People in the United States are losing their belief in the American Dream and the basic American values that were the backbone of its realization. Thus, the transformation of American society has led to new values that are quite far from the original meaning of the American Dream. The first chapter provides an overview of the origins of the concept of the American Dream as well as numerous definitions that have changed during time as much as the basic traditional values that gave rise to it. The second chapter deals with the rise of the American Dream, how it became popular and shaped America as a land of opportunity for immigrants. The third chapter introduces the social and economic changes that led to the downfall of the American Dream and focuses on the loss of belief in the traditional values and the loss of the spirit of the American Dream. The paper concludes with the present state of the American Dream and suggestions about what can be done to restore the American Dream and America as the land of opportunity for all its people.

## 1. The Origins of the American Dream

There have been numerous definitions regarding the American Dream since its origins and a great transformation in the basic American values that were the backbone of the realization of the American Dream.

The term American Dream was first introduced by James Truslow Adams in his bestseller *The Epic of America* written in 1931 in which he reminds us of the promises of equality expressed in the Declaration of Independence: "If America has stood for anything unique in the history of the world, it has been for the American Dream, the belief in the common man and the insistence upon his having, as far as possible, equal opportunity in every way with the rich one" (Adams 135). Also, Adams gives his perspective of the meaning of the American Dream by pointing out that money and a luxurious lifestyle is not important for achieving the American Dream. He claims that "[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 . . . regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (404). Thus, the thing that matters is that each individual has the opportunity to realize their own potential and that upward mobility is possible.

Other authors gave their definitions which are more adapted to the present day. For example, in his book *American Dream: A Cultural History*, Lawrence R. Samuel defined the American Dream as:

a vision of a better, deeper, richer life for every individual, regardless of the position in society which he or she may occupy by the accident of birth. It has been a dream of a chance to rise in the economic scale, but quite as much, or more than that, a chance to develop our capacities to the full, unhampered by unjust restrictions of caste or custom. (13)

His definition is quite similar to that of Adams because he also confirms that upward mobility is possible as well as each individual's attainment of the American Dream. Furthermore, other more recent authors such as Messener and Rosenfeld, focus more on the material aspect of the American Dream as "a cultural ethos that celebrates competitive, individualistic pursuit of monetary success—and its companion institutional structure—one in which the economy tends to take precedence over other social institutions" (7). Thus, Messener and Rosenfeld's definition puts emphasis on monetary success and competition thereby changing the original more spiritual aims of achieving the American Dream.

As can be seen from the above-mentioned examples, definitions of the American Dream vary from author to author but at the core of every definition there is the same belief that all individuals, regardless of their race and class have an opportunity to succeed in life and fulfill their dream.

## **1.1 American Values as the Backbone of the American Dream**

The American values have guided Americans in achieving the American Dream and have highly influenced the American way of life. The values developed from the Declaration of Independence, John Calvin's teachings and works of Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson. The most important values include individual freedom, self-reliance, equality of opportunity, competition, hard work and material wealth (Kearny et al.29).

### **1.1.1 The Origin of the Basic American Values**

The basic American values can be traced to numerous sources one of which is the Declaration of Independence, a document written to declare the separation of the thirteen colonies from the Kingdom of Great Britain. "Much of what the United States—and the American Dream—was to represent can be tracked back to those words penned in 1776" (Smith 40). Besides declaring independence, those words are important for granting Americans basic human rights, above all the right to pursue their dreams. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (US 1776). The idea about human rights was later confirmed with the adoption of the Bill of Rights in 1791 (Bill of Rights).

Through history hard work had always been considered as the duty of slaves. For example, "the Greeks viewed work as a curse and believed only slaves should do manual labor " (Porter 537). In the 17th century, this idea began to change. Hard work begins to be appreciated and "the United States of America became a nation that considered itself a unique place where dreams could be fulfilled" (Smith 4). The valuation of hard work developed from John Calvin's teachings. John Calvin taught people that their success is directly connected to God's will (Starke). "Therefore, hard work and success kept alive the potential and the image of imminent heavenly rewards" (Porter 537). Americans worked hard in order to be rewarded by expectations of going to heaven. Later the expectations changed to more material rewards such as a decent standard of living and monetary success.

In addition to hard work, two other virtues, individuality and competitiveness, were popularized by Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson and it is evident that "America often views Ralph Waldo Emerson and Benjamin Franklin as the founding fathers of what is now known as the American Dream. "Emerson and Franklin embodied the quintessential definition of the American Dream by personally living lives that thrived and focused on individualism, self-reliance and hard work" (Salter).

### **1.1.2 The Basic Values in the Realization of the American Dream**

From the very beginnings of the new nation, the United States has had its traditional values that united Americans in all their diversity and served as guidelines for the American way of life. The following six traditional values of individual freedom, self-reliance, equality of opportunity, competition, hard work and material wealth guided Americans on their way to achieving the American Dream (Kearny et al.29).

Equality of opportunity has been deeply rooted in the American culture and as already mentioned it is embedded in the fundamental principles of the Declaration of Independence according to which everyone has an equal chance to move up in society. This belief brought many immigrants to the United States and made America well-known as the land of opportunity. From the immigrants' perspective, they favored America as the promised land because they recognized "that because individuals are free from excessive political, religious, and social controls, they have a better chance for personal success. Of particular importance is the lack of a hereditary aristocracy" ("Six Basic American Cultural Values").

Equality of opportunity and competition go hand in hand because although everyone has an equal chance to succeed the only way to do so is through competition. Competition is a part of growing up in America, and Americans even see competition as the duty of every citizen. There are many examples of competition in American society, so it is visible in all aspects of American life, especially sports. For example, competitive sports are pretty popular in the community and competitive programs are introduced in American schools from elementary to higher education ("Six Basic American Cultural Values"). Competitive programs not only encourage competition but individuality and self-reliance. Therefore, in America individuality is much more appreciated than collectivity and as a result, everyone is granted individual freedom and responsibility for their own life.

Americans also believe in hard work which should enable every American comfort and a decent standard of living so that "[w]hen someone reaches a goal, that is typically seen as the result of his or her own hard work" ("What are American values? What is important to Americans?").

## **2. The Rise of the American Dream**

The Northern American Continent attracted a great number of immigrants many of whom were satisfied with their life in the new country. They were forced to go in search of a new place to live because of the poor social conditions or lack of freedom in their home country. America offered them the chance for a better life and an opportunity to climb on the social ladder which was almost impossible in Europe at the time.

### **2.1 The Immigration to America**

The immigration to the Northern American continent began in the 16th century with the founding of a new colony called the Lost Colony which was later abandoned (Metzger). More successful were groups of "Pilgrims and Puritans who went to New England" to escape "the plague of a faltering European economy. Their move to the New World, however, also afforded them the opportunity to implant their own cultural values" (Dinnerstein and Reimers 8). This, so-called, first wave of immigrants, came to America not only because of the bad state of the European economy but because of religious persecution of Protestants in England.

The newcomers implemented their ideas about hard-work and success in the new colony. The ideas later evolved into the six previously mentioned values which encouraged people to realize the American Dream.

The second wave of immigrants came after Americans gained their independence and the industrial revolution took place with masses of immigrants coming to the United States. Due to the industrial revolution, there was a huge need for a larger workforce. When Asians and Europeans heard about the California Gold which could have been their chance to get rich easily, they traveled across the oceans in hope of getting wealthy and escaping problems in their home countries ("Immigration Timeline"). Besides the bad conditions in Europe at the time "another compelling, perhaps decisive, reason was something called 'American Fever'" (Dinnerstein and Reimers 24). This so-called 'American Fever' filled peoples' imagination with thoughts about life in America. "For many the goal was not extravagant wealth, but, rather, economic independence and the opportunity for social advancement through financial gain" (Warshauer). Immigrants looked to America as the land of opportunity where they could ensure for themselves and their families a better standard of living. Job opportunities provided decent jobs for decent wages and the basic freedoms ensured them an equal chance for success.

Americans started to attract foreigners in America because they needed workers:

Many colonies therefore had to devise ways to attract immigrant laborers. Along with ship captains they sent agents ('newlanders') to Europe to promote their attractions. Newlanders often dressed in fancy attire and wore pocket watches with heavy gold chains to attest to the wealth found in the New World. They carried tales of maids who became ladies, tenants who became landlords, and apprentices who had advanced to artisans only a few years after reaching their new dwellings. (Dinnerstein, 8)

Although some of the immigrants "were also paid less than Americans and experienced discrimination, abuse and racial prejudice" ("Immigration to the United States, 1851-1900") and the promises that Newlanders brought them did not work out, "it was possible for them to work hard and to achieve success both financially and socially. The economic opportunities significantly elevated the morale of all newcomers to America and made them believe that they can accomplish everything and be successful if they worked hard" ("American Dream in History "). Thus, despite hardships, the immigrants were able to achieve their goals through hard work.

## **2.2 The American Dream at its Peak**

The American Dream was stagnating during the hard times of the Great Depression, but it recovered and came to its peak after World War II, when the United States became the most developed country in the world. Most residents had a secure job and the economic growth was enormous. The belief in the American Dream was held by most American Citizens at the time because they were actually able to prosper if they were diligent and worked hard ("American Dream in History "). "In 1940, a child born into the average American household had a 92 percent chance of making more money than his or her parents" (Leonhardt). This means that social mobility was highly possible at the time.

The growth of the economy combined with the value of hard work contributed to such flourishing of the country. "Economic progress in the United States has been attributed to the successful combination of two social structures - capitalism as an economic system and democracy as a political system. At the heart of this interaction is a particular work ethic in which hard work is considered the path to both and future rewards" (Porter 535).

Life during these times was good, "people of all incomes and education levels could live the American Dream and came to believe that being an American meant your children and grandchildren were almost guaranteed to be better off than you were" (Gold).

Life was also becoming more convenient during this ‘Golden Age’ because the technology advanced, new inventions were made and popularized across the country (Gold). The best example is the car that became a symbol of wealth and a high standard of living in America.



Fig. 1. American neighborhood and popular mean of transportation during the 1950s (Gold, Howard. "The U.S. Economy Will Never Have Another Golden Age. " *MarketWatch*, 1 Sept. 2017, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-us-economy-will-never-have-another-golden-age-2017-09-01>. Accessed 17 Sept 2019)



### **3. The Fall of the American Dream**

The economic growth of the mid-1950s brought great social and economic changes and changed the meaning of the original American Dream. Former producers and people prone to saving were transformed into consumers. It is interesting to note that the mentioned changes and their consequences are seen in today's American consumer society where overspending on nonessential purchases continues to lead to the burden of debt and the inability to afford the essentials. As a result of mismanaged finances, the American Dream is becoming unreachable for most Americans.

The new media, especially television, had a great impact on the above-mentioned changes in American society. The advertising generated through all forms of the media shaped the attitudes and habits of American consumers. The advertising media created trends that propagated values that were different from the original American values. Also, with the introduction of credit cards, consumers were encouraged to spend more and more money that they did not have. The media commercialized the American Dream and soon there was a growing gap between the poor and rich. Social mobility was low, indebtedness high, and wars which America led left folks disappointed and disillusioned. As a result, many Americans began to question whether the American Dream was even possible.

#### **3.1 Changing the Attitudes Towards the American Dream Through the Media**

As mentioned above, Americans acquired more and more material wealth whether they could afford it or not. With the appearance of massive advertisement campaigns and modern devices they started to identify the American Dream with their dream of prosperity, keeping up with neighbors and splurging on luxury items. This overspending was looked upon with disapproval by some and even F. Scott Fitzgerald scoffed at the idea that the American Dream consists of race for wealth, but his warning took no notice at the time (Kruse).

The idea of the American Dream has continued to live on commercial television since the mid-1950s when the American dream was integrated into the concept of shopping and consumption as an incentive for citizens to become consumers and support the development of the road, tourism, hospitality, food and beverage, commercial centers and fashion. The American dream has evolved from the highest state level through political and economic ventures. (Pantić Conić 155)

Television played an important role in changing the attitudes towards the American Dream. It was integrated in almost every home and seduced people by selling them different interpretations of the American Dream (Confino). "Sociologist David Reisman feared that consumerism and runaway materialism were becoming central to nation's identity and undermining 'traditional American values'" (Sanders).

Another example of changing the attitudes are games of luck. "Whether through the television entertainment industry, state-based lottery marketing drives, or legal advertisements, Americans are told again and again that the road to the financial success of the American Dream is more a matter of luck than hard work" (Warshauer). This new view of how to gain material success differs greatly from the original value of hard work being the key to success.

### **3.2 Middle-Class Crisis**

Middle-Class Americans began to have problems making ends meet because they were earning less while their spending increased. According to *Falling Behind* published in 2017, the middle class has slightly higher incomes today than they had decades ago but they spend much more (138). The cost of living has been growing and people who live in an era of advertising and mass production are encouraged to consume more products than ever. Surrounded by advertisements, shopping malls and entertainment parks that create artificial needs, people are spending much more than before. Technology advances every year offering people new gadgets without which they can no longer imagine their lives. In order to keep up with the higher standard of living, middle-class working people have to work much more than before, but their wages have been raised only slightly as already mentioned. "Women now work on average approximately two hundred hours more each year than they did in the mid-1970s, and men work on average of roughly one hundred hours more each year" (Frank 78). As the discrepancy between needs, wishes and possibilities increases, more people feel dissatisfaction with their lives and the system.

These problems do not only affect grown-ups but also children from the American middle class who have less opportunity to earn more in their future because in America, "today, a child's life chances are more dependent on the income of his or her parents than in Europe, or any other of the advanced industrial countries for which there are data" (Stiglitz). Although, there are those who have had a privileged start in life, and a better education which gives them more opportunities to raise on the social ladder, have higher salaries and better living conditions.

Class inequality becomes greater every year and it is still very high because although America is richer than any other country in the world, the wealth is not evenly distributed. Namely, "the top 1 percent in the United States holds 42.5 percent of national wealth" ("Global Inequality").

### **3.3 Americans in Debt**

Credit cards are used by a large number of Americans. Some use them for making ends meet and others to attain a higher standard of living. But the problem is that credit cards as a consequence have a high level of indebtedness in the society. They came into use during the 1950s. Firstly, people used them to have the means for purchases they would otherwise have to save money for but they are more and more becoming a way of life that leads to over indebtedness of the society. Consumers' attitudes towards credit cards are not popular but they keep using them nonetheless (Durkin and Price 623).

Debt stimulated the economy because people spend more money by taking loans but on the other hand it causes other problems. Buying things (with borrowed money) gives people the feeling that they acquired the American Dream but it may have disastrous consequences on younger generations and it is risky because interest rates tend to fluctuate rapidly ("How Debt Is Killing the American Dream").

### **3.4 Vietnam War as a Violation of Human Rights**

After the Vietnam War, many young Americans lost faith in the nation and democracy. Soldiers came back home disappointed and outraged because they realized that they had been fighting for the wrong cause killing millions of innocent people.

Besides that, because of racial inequality rich and elite people were not obliged to fight in the Vietnam War or were spared. There was a pressure on young black men to fight in the war ("Vietnam War: 30 years later"). The best example is Muhammad Ali, one of the best boxers of the 20th century, who had to spend three years in prison because he refused to fight while many white people of his age were spared of the punishment of even not forced to take part in the war.

### **3.5 Losing the Spirit of the American Dream**

It seems like America turned into a country of inequality and stepped away from their roots because "[n]ot long ago, a group of students in Indianapolis showed copies of the Declaration

of Independence to several hundred people and asked them to sign it. Most refused, stating that it sounded rather 'dangerous'" (Grunwald 19, qtd. in Whitehead 24).

Even though the appeal of equality of opportunity has always encouraged immigration to the United States, it seems like things are changing in this new era. "The United States has long been perceived as a land of opportunity for immigrants. Yet, both in the past and today, US natives have expressed concern that immigrants fail to integrate into US society and lower wages for existing workers"(Abramitzky and Boustan 1311). The growing negative perception of immigrants is causing a decline in the numbers of those wanting to come to achieve their dream.

Hard work which once made America great does not seem to be guaranteed for prosperity. Almost two-thirds of Americans do not believe that hard work is enough for success and that you can actually go from rags to riches but half of them said that they work so hard they are almost always exhausted at their workplace (Confino). Thus, as mentioned earlier, both the American Dream and its values are being devalued.

### **3.6 The Present State of the American Dream**

After unfavorable social and economic changes, the United States became a country where inequality is on the rise and every year less and less people believe in the American Dream. "A CNN/Opinion Research poll in June showed 59 percent of Americans said the American Dream was unachievable -- the worst that number has been since 1996" (Blake). Before massive consumption and media, most people could have a decent life and cover their expenses. Today most depend on credit cards and borrow money to keep up with the standard.

Due to changes in the economy it was much easier to achieve the American Dream decades ago when the economy was flourishing and it was possible to financially prosper. "Just 31 percent said those who worked hard had a good chance of improving their lot in life" (Blake).

Another problem is the low possibility of financial advancement of the American middle-class. "Median household income has fallen since the financial crisis of 2008, while income for the wealthiest of Americans has actually risen" (Eskow).

Some Americans are very pessimistic about the idea of the American Dream. "A new poll from the Public Religion Research Institute shows 55 percent of Americans say the American Dream either never existed in the first place, or that it did exist but doesn't anymore" (Blake).

### 3.7 Restoring the American Dream

Restoring the American Dream may still be possible with the right strategies. Ellwood and Patel propose 5 approaches to restoring the American Dream:

1. Change the narrative.
2. Create access to good jobs.
3. Ensure zip code is not destiny.
4. Provide support that empowers.
5. Transform data use. (3)

The first strategy includes changing peoples' attitudes towards their life situations. Statistics show that Americans are losing hope and becoming more and more pessimistic so the change in attitude is important but hard to implement and may take many years to show results.

The second strategy concentrates on giving people an opportunity to work in better paid or higher-quality workplaces. This strategy could make a change because good jobs offer people a chance to move up and gradually increase their wages. This would make upward mobility more common in America.

The third and the fourth strategies plan on building a better foundation for the poorest layer of the American Society. This could rebuild the American Dream because those who were born in poor families and grew up in violent neighborhoods would be given an opportunity and backing to change their social environment or move out.

Finally, the last strategy focuses on the use of statistics, information and knowledge derived from research. High-quality research is important because it enables the detection of the problems and awareness.

These strategies may be helpful but for the complete restoring of the American Dream we need more serious programs which cover all the problematic areas of the society.

## **Conclusion**

The prototype of the idea of the American Dream first came to life during the 17th century with the colonization of the Northern American Continent and triumphed during the 1950s. The flourishing economy and the American values gave rise to the American Dream but social and economic changes that resulted in social inequality made it impossible for the majority of Americans to achieve their Dream.

The major shift occurred when Americans became consumers and started spending more and saving less. Their overspending enabled them to attain a higher standard of living and satisfy artificial needs created by the media. This, as a consequence made people dependent on credit cards and borrowed money. Another problem arose with low level of mobility of workplace, which is particularly seen in the American middle-class. Also, wars, racial inequality and gender inequality have made Americans less likely to believe in a fair society and in what was promised to them in the Declaration of Independence.

Although there is a decrease in the number of people who believe in the American Dream and most Americans do not live the American Dream there are still people who believe that it could possibly be achieved and that there is hope to restore it with the help of the right strategies.

In closing, social and economic changes affected the American society and the American Dream but did not lead to its death. Statistics show that the belief in the American Dream has decreased but a number of Americans still believe that they can achieve the American Dream despite the unfavorable changes. Also, immigrants are still coming to America hoping that they would achieve the American Dream.

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