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Keeping the Dream Alive

By Jon Meacham

The perennial conviction that those who work hard and play by the rules will be rewarded with a more comfortable present and a stronger future for their children faces assault from just about every direction. That great enemy of democratic capitalism, economic inequality, is real and growing. The unemployment rate is dispiritingly high. The nation's long-term fiscal health is at risk, and the American political system, the engine of what Thomas Jefferson called "the world's best hope," shows no sign of reaching solutions commensurate with the problems of the day.

It has not always been this way. On Friday, May 1, 1931, James Truslow Adams, a popular historian, was putting the final touches on the preface to his latest book. It was a curious time in the life of the nation. Though the Crash of 1929 had signaled the beginning of the Great Depression that was to endure for years to come, there was also a spirit of progress, of possibility. On the day Adams was finishing his manuscript, President Herbert Hoover pressed a button in Washington to turn on the lights of the newly opened Empire State Building at 34th Street and Fifth Avenue, which, at 1,250 ft., was to be the tallest building in Manhattan until the construction of the World Trade Center four decades later.

High hopes amid hard times: the moment matched Adams' thesis in his book, *The Epic of America*, a history of the nation that was to popularize a term not yet in the general vernacular in those last years of the reigns of Harding, Coolidge and Hoover. Adams' subject, he wrote, was "that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank which is the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world." It was not a new thing, this abiding belief that tomorrow would be better than today. "That dream or hope," Adams wrote, "has been present from the start."

What was new was the specific phrase Adams was using: *the American Dream*. From John Winthrop and the Puritan search for an earthly "city upon a hill" in the New World to Benjamin Franklin's "The Way to Wealth" aphorisms to Horatio Alger and the drama of the upwardly mobile, Adams' phrase had — and has — the deepest of roots in the American experience. For reasons ranging from geography to market capitalism to Jeffersonian ideas of liberty, we may well be the only people on the planet who tend to believe without irony that Thomas Paine was right when he declared that "we have it in our power to begin the world over again."

In fact, we don't have that power. No one does. History cannot be dismissed with a nod. But from generation to generation, Americans have indeed dreamed of steady personal and national progress. In the twilight of his life, Franklin D. Roosevelt, himself one of the most accomplished purveyors of hope and dreams in American history, recalled the words of his old Groton School rector, Endicott Peabody, who had told him, "Things in life will not always run smoothly. Sometimes we will be rising toward the heights — then all will seem to reverse itself and start downward. The great fact to remember is that the trend of civilization itself is forever upward, that a line drawn through the middle of the peaks and the valleys of the centuries always has an upward trend."

Roosevelt quoted that observation in his final Inaugural Address in the winter of 1945, and in the ensuing decades, American power and prosperity reached epic heights. The Peabody-Roosevelt gospel seemed to get it right: the world was not perfect, nor was it perfectible, but the story of America was at heart the story of doing well, of conquering disease and going to the stars and defending freedom and creating wealth. By and large, Americans of the postwar era were living those "better, richer, and happier" lives that Adams had written about in the shadow of the Crash.

Whoever rises to deliver the inaugural Address of 2013 will speak to a nation in which the American Dream is under profound economic and cultural pressure. This is perhaps best measured by the state of the middle class, about which we hear so much, and with good reason: roughly 90% of Americans self-identify as middle, upper-middle or lower-middle class (2% acknowledge being "upper class"; 6% say they are "lower class").

Definitions of class are hard to come by — so much so that the U.S. Department of Commerce, on behalf of Vice President Joe Biden's White House Task Force on the Middle Class, emphasized descriptive language rather than statistics, finding that "middle-class families are defined by their aspirations more than their income. [We assume] that middle-class families aspire to homeownership, a car, college education for their children, health and retirement security and occasional family vacations."

The government's verdict: "It is more difficult now than in the past for many people to achieve middle-class status because prices for certain key goods — health care, college and housing — have gone up faster than income." Median household income has also remained stagnant for more than a decade; when the figures are adjusted for inflation, Americans are making less now than they were when Bill Clinton was in the White House.

There, in brief, is the crisis of our time. The American Dream may be slipping away. We have overcome such challenges before. To recover the Dream requires knowing where it came from, how it lasted so long and why it matters so much. Emerson once remarked that there is properly no history, only biography. This is the biography of an idea, one that made America great. Whether that idea has much of a future is the question facing Americans now.

The History of a Dream Dreams of God and of gold (not necessarily in that order) made America possible. The First Charter of Virginia — the 1606 document that authorized the founding of Jamestown — was 3,805 words long. Ninety-eight of them are about carrying religion to "such people as yet live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God"; 97% of the charter concerns the taking of "all the Lands, Woods, Soil, Grounds, Havens, Ports, Rivers, Mines, Minerals, Marshes, Waters, Fishing, Commodities," as well as orders to "dig, mine, and search for all Manner of Mines of Gold, Silver, and Copper."

Explorers in the 16th and 17th centuries sought riches; religious dissenters came seeking freedom of worship. In 1630 layman John Winthrop wrote a sermon alluding to America as "a city upon a hill," explicitly linking the New World to the Sermon on the Mount. (Always shrewd about visuals, Ronald Reagan would add the adjective *shining* to the image several centuries later.)

We have been cognitively dissonant from the beginning. European settlers set about driving the Native American populations to the west, setting in motion a tragic chain of events that culminated in the Trail of Tears in the middle of the 19th century. In 1619, meanwhile, a Dutch man-of-war brought African slaves to Virginia. And so while white settlers built and dreamed, people of color were subjugated and exploited by a rising nation that prided itself on the expansion of liberty.

The British Americans who broke with England to form a new nation in the 1770s found slavery inconvenient but not insurmountable as they codified the dream that had fueled the discovery and early years of the New World. By founding the U.S. on the idea that a man's natural rights included "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," Jefferson, writing in the Philadelphia summer of 1776, put hope at the center of the national drama. *The pursuit of happiness* is a phrase philosophically rooted in the thinking of the Scottish Enlightenment, but it was only in America that the notion moved from theory to broad-based reality.

This was partly because there was so much room to run in the New World. The vastness of the continent, the seemingly endless frontier, the staggering natural resources: these, combined with a formidable American work ethic, made the pursuit of happiness more than a full-time proposition. It was a consuming one, all-enveloping. Suddenly birth mattered less than it ever had before. Entitled aristocracies crumbled before natural ones. If you were white and willing to work, you stood a chance of transcending the circumstances of your father and his father's father. By 1832, the height of the Age of Jackson, even Henry Clay, who thought Old Hickory an American Bonaparte, could declare, "We are a nation of self-made men."

The next year, President Jackson appointed one such man to be postmaster of Salem, Ill. Though a Whig, Abraham Lincoln was happy to accept. His rise from frontier origins became both fable and staple in the American Dream narrative. Lincoln understood the power of his story in real time, for he knew that he embodied the Jeffersonian hopes of Americans everywhere. "I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House," Lincoln said the year before he died. "I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has."

The Dream is about liberty and prosperity and stability, but it is also about escape and reinvention. Mark Twain understood this. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* doesn't flinch from the racism and greed of American life. If there is any redemption to be found, it comes from small moments of communion, of humanity. The novel concludes with the enslaved Jim's being granted his freedom and Huck's deciding "to light out for the Territory, ahead of the rest" — an enduring American impulse and an essential element of the American Dream.

The myth of the West was the myth of the nation: that all of us could light out for the Territory and build new, prosperous lives. The allure of the belief in the individual's capacity to make his way — to cross oceans or mountains — only grew stronger as America grew older. Our center of political gravity has always been in motion from east to west (and, to a real extent, from north to south). Though the Census of 1890 declared that the frontier was no more, the idea

of packing up and moving on to better things has never faded.

Dream and Reality Yet there is a missing character in this popular version of the story of America's rugged individualism: the government, which helped make the rise of the individual possible. Americans have never liked acknowledging that what we now call the public sector has always been integral to making the private sector successful. Given the American Revolution's origins as a rebellion against taxation and distant authority, such skepticism is understandable, even if it's not well founded. As we have with race, we have long proved ourselves quite capable of living with this contradiction, using Hamiltonian means (centralized decisionmaking) while speaking in Jeffersonian rhetorical terms (that government is best which governs least).

The Pacific Railroad and Homestead acts, signed by Lincoln a century and a half ago this year, used the power of government to settle the West. The railway legislation gave federal support to the creation of a transcontinental railroad, a vast project that played a key role in making the U.S. an economic and cultural whole. Once the Golden Spike had joined the rails of east and west, the danger and duration of stagecoach rides gave way to the muscle and speed of locomotives — able to carry dreamers west, ship crops east and shrink the psychic distance of the continent.

The Homestead measures enabled settlers to claim small parcels of farmland west of the Mississippi, making new lives (and livelihoods) possible. The Morrill Act created land-grant universities, opening higher education to many throughout the country. The legislation of the Progressive Era brought a measure of humanity to the rigors of the industrial age and a democratization of power through women's suffrage and the direct election of Senators. The prosperity of the Roaring '20s proved short-lived, opening the way for the Age of Roosevelt and the New Deal.

Americans have been ambivalent about government since at least the time of George III, often approving its role when we benefit from it and disapproving when others seem to be getting something we aren't. The New Deal and particularly Social Security redefined the individual's relationship to the state, knitting the public and private sectors together much more closely. Long a more or less silent partner in people's lives, government became more evident as the U.S. struggled to survive the crisis of the 1930s.

We forget how extreme that crisis was for those who lived through it. Asked whether there had ever been anything like the Great Depression before, John Maynard Keynes replied, "Yes, it was called the Dark Ages, and it lasted 400 years." Democracy itself was in the dock, the American Dream a seemingly failed idea. Other dreams were now in play. The new age was up for grabs, it appeared, between the totalitarianism of Germany and Italy and that of Soviet communism. Roosevelt was said to have remarked that the two most dangerous men in America were Douglas MacArthur and Huey Long — possible dictators of the right and of the left.

Yet there was FDR, determined to preserve the world that Jefferson and Jackson had built and Lincoln had saved. The cataclysm of war lifted America to imperial status and set off an economic boom unrivaled in the history of the world. The war ended the Great Depression, but the work of the New Deal added a new dimension to the American Dream: the broad expectation that government had a role to play in advancing individual lives.

After the defeat of Hitler and of imperial Japan, the Dream was rekindled. Through the GI Bill and home loans and deductions for mortgage interest, as well as interstate rail and highways and Cold War defense spending, more Americans entered the middle class than ever before.

Even those long excluded from it. It is striking that the symbolic high-water mark of the civil rights movement was framed in terms of the American Dream. When Martin Luther King Jr. rose to address the March on Washington in August 1963, he described his dream of an integrated America as "deeply rooted in the American Dream." He was asking only for black Americans' rightful share of the life that most white Americans had come to take for granted: a life in which whites were judged by "the content of their character."

The Crack-Up The story is familiar: Jim Crow was dying in the same hour many whites believed the American Dream was also in extremis. Social customs and values largely taken for granted were under assault. America seemed powerless in Vietnam and unmoored at home. By late 1967, columnist Joseph Kraft had put the phrase *Middle Americans* in political circulation. Richard Nixon called them "the silent majority."

In 1970 the editors of TIME named "the Middle Americans" as the Man and Woman of the Year, writing that with the exceptions of Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Henry Kissinger, Nixon's Administration was "like the reunion photograph of a Depression class that rose to the top by Horatio Alger virtues." One example Time chose to note: "George Romney,

the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, is the son of a Mormon who was driven out of Mexico by Pancho Villa and supported his 10 children for a time as a carpenter in El Paso."

John Updike captured the cultural moment well in his 1971 novel *Rabbit Redux*. The middle-class protagonist, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, finds himself in a conversation about equality with a black man named Skeeter. "You talk as if the whole purpose of this country since the start has been to frustrate Negroes," says Angstrom. "Hell, you're just ten percent. The fact is most people don't give a damn what you do. This is the freest country around, make it if you can, if you can't, die gracefully."

The Dream that had survived the '30s barely dragged itself out of the '60s. In ensuing decades, the impact of economic growth has been uneven. The widening gap between rich and poor suggests the Dream is becoming more elusive for more people than at any other time in our history. Strangely, it's now possible for the French to be more socially and economically mobile than Americans.

Restoring the Dream Economic fairness is not a new concern. "There is no reason why wealth, which is a social product, should not be more equitably controlled and distributed in the interests of society," wrote Adams in *The Epic of America*.

In fact there is a reason: by its very nature capitalism produces winners — and losers. Some dreams come true; some don't. Equality of outcome, though, is not the same thing as equality of opportunity, and equality of opportunity is at the heart of the American vision. "And that dream has been realized more fully in actual life here than anywhere else," Adams wrote, "though very imperfectly even among ourselves."

In 2003, Jim Cullen, a historian who teaches at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in New York City, published an illuminating book titled *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. Asked how he assesses the state of his old subject today, Cullen says, "With a lot of folks, I'm afraid I'm not as optimistic as I was. An idea like this does not die overnight, but I'm worried."

What makes the current moment different from previous ebb times, Cullen notes, is the rise of the rest of the world. "In the 19th and 20th centuries, no one spoke of the French Dream or the Russian Dream, but in the 21st century it probably is possible to speak of a Chinese Dream," says Cullen.

Ronald Reagan was eloquent about American possibilities; so is Bill Clinton. Such different men, yet they were both products of a middle-class America that enabled the son of an alcoholic shoe salesman (Reagan) and the stepson of an alcoholic car salesman (Clinton) each to rise to the presidency.

Taken together, the political legacies of Reagan and Clinton are instructive as President Obama — or a President Romney — tries to rebuild a foundation under the middle class. Neither Reagan nor Clinton was particularly doctrinaire: they believed in the capacity of individuals to build lives and create jobs. They differed in degree, not kind, on the question of government's role. Reagan said government was the problem but didn't do a great deal to dismantle it. Clinton declared the era of Big Government to be over but kept the country in the political center as the boom of the 1990s powered by information technology (with roots, inevitably, in government spending) created record surpluses.

And despite the fervently held views of their foes, neither Obama nor Romney is particularly doctrinaire either. This year the choice for President comes at a time when specific ideas about relieving and growing the middle class — education reform and access, for instance — seem less important than the present and the future of the overall economy. The most basic requirement of the American Dream is a job. In 1980 Reagan broke away from Jimmy Carter after asking, "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" Romney will pose that question again and again; Obama will talk about how it takes longer than three years to reverse a decade of decline. Obama will say Romney favors the rich; Romney will say he wants to create a country where everybody can once again dream of getting rich. The winner will be the one who convinces just enough of us that he, not the other guy, can fuel economic growth. It may not be an edifying conversation, but it's the conversation we're about to have. And both men will talk about the American Dream, but no single politician can restore the faith of our fathers and mothers. That's up to all of us.

We are stronger the wider we open our arms. Our dreams are more powerful when they are shared by others in our time. And we are the only ones who can create a climate for the American Dream to survive another generation, then another and another. "If the American dream is to come true and to abide with us," Adams wrote in 1931, "it will, at bottom, depend on the people themselves." True then, and true now.

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