

# How to achieve the american dream



How does one achieve the American Dream? The answer undoubtedly depends upon one's definition of the Dream. John Winthrop envisioned a religious paradise in a "City upon a Hill." Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed of racial equality. Barack Obama holds the belief of reclaiming the American Dream. All men dreamed for what they perceived as perfection. Yet the question remains, how does one achieve this success? How is the Dream realized?

Americans have traditionally devoted their efforts to thrift and hard work. During the Colonial Period, Benjamin Franklin showed an example that "Early to Bed, and early to rise, makes a Man healthy, wealthy, and wise." Americans of the Early Republic dreamed the country to be democratic and powerful on world stage. Abraham Lincoln insisted that the "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

During Westward Movement and the Civil War, many Americans experienced profound hardship and they overcame adversity through industry, perseverance, self-reliance, and self-discipline. The popular "rags to riches" legend became a landmark of American society; anyone could succeed and achieve wealth if they worked hard.

There is no denying that the shift away from the traditional American work ethic corresponded directly with the rise of industry. Work values changed dramatically when America became an industrial society. Many Americans no longer regard hard work as the only means to success. They want to cut corners in pursuit of wealth, fame and success. The results of their efforts

can be imagined, no one can change his fate without hard work. They have to face the cruel reality that the dream turn out to be illusion.

## **Chapter One Definition of the American Dream**

What is the American Dream? It has been a classical question asked not only by foreigners, but more often by Americans themselves. Many historians and sociologists tend to hold different opinions. At the same time, an ordinary American citizen can't define it accurately due to its complexity. That is to say, everyone has his own understanding of the definition of the American Dream. Taking many factors concerned into consideration, a conclusion can be achieved that the American Dream can be interpreted from two categories. Firstly, the maximum American Dream. It refers to the national dream that contains the desire for freedom, equality and democracy and to be a powerful country on world stage. On the other hand, the minimum dream. It belongs to the common people. For most of them, the American Dream turns out to be closely related to their daily life. It can be regarded as these specific goals, such as receiving higher education, living a happy life with good salary, keeping a good health, and having a superior social status.

In order to understand the abundant definitions of the American Dream, we have to comprehend the origin and development of the American Dream. It is the American people and history that shape the meaning of the American Dream.

Since the birth of the United States in 1776, the definition of the American Dream has changed over the course of history. The origin of the American Dream can be traced back to the period of colonization. The American Dream

is a national ethos in terms of the promise of prosperity and success. The ethos indicates the ability that everyone can gain his fortune and make progress through his participation and hard-work. With regard to the American Dream, this includes the possibility for one's children to grow up and receive a good education and career without artificial barriers. It's the opportunity to make individual choices without the prior restrictions that limit people with respect to their class, religion, race or ethnicity.

Historian James Truslow Adams firstly put forward the phrase “ American Dream” in his 1931 book Epic of America:

“ The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, also too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”

He also wrote:

“ The American Dream, which has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century, has not been a dream of material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as a man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed

by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class.”

Martin Luther King Jr. in his “ Letter from a Birmingham Jail” stated that the civil rights movement was in the quest for the black people’s American dream:

“ We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands. . . . when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.”

The president Barack Obama delivered his victory speech after he won the presidential campaign:

“ If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.”

## **Chapter Two Origin of the American Dream**

### **2. 1 A New Land**

In 1492, Columbus finished his voyage with the support from the King of Spain. He believed that by sailing west from Europe, he could reach Asia. He

never succeeded, but instead he landed on the islands in the Caribbean Sea and discovered the New World. This great geographic discovery of the New World opened the door to European settlers. In 1497, an Italian sailor, John Cabot who was financed by the English King, arrived in today's Canada. Soon the English King claimed that the whole of the territory of North America belonged to England. In order to enforce this claim, the Englishmen began to establish permanent settlements in North America.

The early 17th century was the beginning of a great tide of emigrants from Europe to North America. Spanning more than three hundred years, this movement grew from a trickle of a few hundred English colonists to a flood of millions of newcomers. Impelled by powerful and diverse motivations, many European emigrants left their homelands for the New Land. Most of them tried to escape economic and political oppression, to seek the freedom to practice their religion, or to find opportunities denied them at home.

## **2. 2 Europe in the 16th and 17th century**

During the Middle Ages, Europe was under the single spiritual authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The feudal system prevailed during this period of time. The peasants were tied to the soil and had to suffer the economic and political oppression. Merchants and craftsmen were handicapped by the social disorders. By the 16th century, some new and powerful social forces began to emerge which led to great changes in Europe and the development of America.

First of all, it's the development of capitalism. Take the historical event Enclosure Movement for instance. The Commercial Revolution had created a

burgeoning textile industry, which demanded an increasing supply of wool to keep the looms running. Landlords enclosed farmlands and evicted the peasants for the purpose of sheep cultivation. Colonial expansion turned to be an outlet for these displaced peasant population.

The second major force that brought about the modern development of Europe was the Renaissance, which was marked by a changing outlook on life. The Renaissance spoke highly of the nature of humanity. The God-centered world was challenged by the wide spread of science and technology. People began to be more confident in themselves and showed more interest in the world.

The third influential force was the Religious Reformation, a religious reform movement that started from Germany, then spread over the continent of Europe. In 1517, Martin Luther argued that the Pope and church had no right to take advantage of the people for the remission of sins. He protested against the Catholic Church because of the power of abuse and corruption. Another man, John Calvin started his reform movement after Martin Luther. Calvinism soon prevailed in England and attracted many followers.

In England, King Henry â... disagreed with the Roman Catholic Church on many political issues. On the other hand, he wanted to end his marriage with the Queen but without the permission from the Pope. At last, King Henry â... broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and established the Church of England, and he became the head of the Church of England himself.

These religion reforms all challenged the authority of the Pope and the Catholic Church which controlled people's religious beliefs and interfered in political affairs of the nations.

During the religious upheavals of the 16th century, a group of people who discontent in the Church of England and worked towards religious, moral and social reforms. They were called the Puritans. The puritans were deeply influenced by Calvinism and thought that the Church of England had become a product of political struggles and attempted to purify the Church.

Such puritan beliefs were against the Church of England and undermined royal authority, so they were cruelly persecuted. Some of them were threw into prison and even executed for their religious beliefs. In order to escape persecution from Church and the King, many of the puritans came to North America.

### **2.3 The Early Settlement**

The first British permanent settlement was founded in 1607 at Jamestown, Virginia. This was organized by the London Company with a charter which King James â... granted. According to the Jamestown founder John Smith, he held the opinion that “ Heaven and Earth never agreed better to frame a place for man's habitation”

The second English settlement was established in Massachusetts Bay. It was founded by the puritans who separated themselves from the Church of England. In 1620, a small group of puritans took the ship Mayflower and left for North America. When they reached their destination, they drafted an



agreement which was called the Mayflower Compact and was signed by all the men on board.

The Mayflower Compact played a significant role in history. It was regarded as the first attempt of American democratic experience to set up a civil government for the public. More importantly, the far-reaching political principles set by the Compact laid down the foundations of the democratic government.

The puritans hoped to build “ a city upon hill”-an ideal community where they would live in strict with their religious beliefs and set an example for all of Christendom. The puritans had left rich cultural legacies to future Americans. The American values such as individualism, hard work, respect of education own very much to the puritan beliefs.

## **2. 4 The American Revolution**

Through the 18th century, the maturing British North American colonies inevitably forged a distinct identity. By the early 1760s, the 13 colonies in North America had developed a similar American pattern in politics, economy and cultural life. At the same time, the population grew vastly and they had long years of self-government to deal with their own issues.

In September 1774, the First Continental Congress, a meeting of colonial leaders who opposed British oppression in the colonies met in Philadelphia. These leaders urged Americans to disobey and boycott British ruling. At the same time, they began to organize militias to defend themselves. On April 19, 1775, the first shot was fired when 700 British soldiers went to capture a

colonial arms depot in Lexington. Thus the American war of Independence began.

### **2. 4. 1 Common Sense**

In January 1776, Thomas Paine, a radical political theorist who had come to America from England in 1774 published a pamphlet Common Sense. Paine had already sensed the rise of tension and the spirit of rebellion. In the pamphlet, Paine attacked the hereditary monarchy, criticized the men who ruled as Kings, and called for the people to discard the loyalty to the King and the British Empire. He presented two choices -continued submission to a tyrannical King and an evil government, or liberty and happiness as a self-sufficient, independent republic.

Common Sense soon came to be a best-seller, which greatly inspired the people's awareness of independence.

### **2. 4. 2 Declaration of Independence**

In July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence which was drafted by Thomas Jefferson adopted by the Congress. The Declaration officially proclaimed the independence of 13 North America colonies:

“ 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. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, – That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its

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foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

The Declaration not only announced the birth of a new nation, but also put forward with the idea of human freedom and democracy. The Declaration was deeply influenced by the Enlightenment political philosophy, especially from the English political philosopher John Locke.

John Locke came up with the social-contract theory of government. Only a government based on popular consent could secure natural rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Thomas Jefferson linked Locke’s principles directly to the situation in the colonies. Thus, to fight for American independence was to fight on behalf of one’s own natural rights.

The War of Independence came to end in 1781 with the victory of North America. The Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783 and the sovereignty of 13 colonies was acknowledged by British government. The new United States stretched west to the Mississippi River, north to Canada, and south to Florida.

## **2. 5 Benjamin Franklin**

Benjamin Franklin was one of the founding fathers of the United States. He was born in a poor family that had little money to send him to school. He didn’t graduate with two years school learning but he continued his education through greedy self-learning. The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin vividly depicted his personal experience from a poor and lowliness boy to be a rich and famous man. All his progress he had made belonged to

his own efforts to be excellent, the longing for success and the pursuit of magnificent moral.

Benjamin Franklin was deeply influenced by the Enlightenment and Puritanism. He devoted himself to practice the values of thrift, hard work. He advocated democracy with self-governing institutions, and opposed to authoritarianism both political and religious.

From the Autobiography, the process of realizing American Dream can be seen clearly. Undoubtedly, the meaning of Benjamin Franklin's success goes far beyond himself, and is thought-provoking to many Americans. Franklin set a good example for other people to follow and his experience is the best explanation of the American Dream.

## **Chapter Three Development of the American Dream**

### **3. 1 The Political System**

The Treaty of Paris in 1783 recognized the independence of the United States and the former 13 colonies became 13 states of America. Although the Declaration of Independence proclaimed that 13 colonies “ are, and of right to be free and independent states”, they had no idea about the future political system of the United States. They had to face the fact that a new nation couldn't grow well without a suitable and effective political system.

#### **3. 1. 1The Federal Constitution**

When the American Revolution was over, the United States was not one unified nation as it is today. According to the Articles of Confederation, each state had its own government and handled all of its internal affairs. To make matters worse, the Congress didn't have the authority to ask any state to do

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anything. For example, it could not tax any citizen or to regulate commerce among the states.

Faced with domestic difficulties and outside challenge and threat from European powers, a more powerful and effective government was desperately needed in order to safeguard independence and freedom. Only in this way could each state work together and the country be powerful enough to protect the people's interests. First of all, a Constitution was badly needed to replace the Articles of Confederation.

The delegates from 12 states without Rhode Island attended the Constitution Convention in 1787. During the convention, James Madison, later the fourth President of the United States, took a leading role with his remarkable contributions to the work of Constitution, and earned him the title "Father of the Constitution". After over three months' discussions, debates and compromises, the Constitution came out at last.

The Preamble to the Constitution states the purpose of the government:

" We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

### **3. 1. 2 Three Branches of Government**

According to the Constitution, a federal system was set up with a strong central government. To protect the democracy and defend against a

tyranny, the government consists of three parts, the executive, the legislative and the judicial. Each branch has powers that the others do not have and each branch has a way of limiting any wrongful action by another branch. This is called the principle of “ checks and balances”

### **3. 1. 3 Bill of Rights**

The Constitution of 1787 didn't make it clear to protect individual rights. The calls for amendments protecting individual rights were quickly solved by Congress. In 1791, Congress adopted ten amendments to make them part of the Constitution. To all Americans, they are known as the Bill of Rights. According to it, Americans have the freedom of speech, press, religion and the right to assemble peacefully, protest and demand changes.

### **3. 2 Westward Movement**

Westward Movement was one of the solemn and meaningful parts of American history. In the extension of American boundaries from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific coast, the nation occupied vast land in the middle and west. The frontier moved in a westward direction for nearly 300 years across the wilderness and barren plains.

The road to the west was full of difficulties and danger, but these settlers went on and never gave up. “ Go west and grow with the county” became a famous motto to these settlers. Once an English traveler described these frontier settlers as “ a daring, hardly race of men, who live in miserable cabin.... They are unpolished but hospitable, kind to strangers, honest and trustworthy.....”

Frederick Jackson Turner was one of the most renowned American historians and an advocate of Westward Movement. He declared that the frontier was significant in American history and made America more than an extension of Europe. It had created a nation with a culture that was different from Europe, not only more pragmatic and energetic, but also more emphasis on individuality and democracy.

It's hard to believe that three centuries of Westward Movement had no impact on the national character. For the descendents of European, they explored the Wild West land with the purpose of making a better life. They were usually described as the pioneers of American, and full of courage and intelligence. They made remarkable progress to the development of the country.

On the other hand, the negative effects of Westward Movement should not be ignored. There is no denying that Westward Movement was a bloody and brutal process. America pillaged the land of Texas, New Mexico and California through a war of conquest against Mexico. It's a nightmare for Native Americans because of the ruthless treatment from American whites. Also it caused the destruction of the natural environment in the west.

### **3.3 The Civil War**

During the 1850s, the issue of slavery severed the political bonds that held the United States together. The appeal for abolishing slavery had aroused deep concern all over the country. In 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe published Uncle Tom's Cabin; a novel portrayed the cruelty of slavery and pointed out the fundamental conflict between North and South. American had to face the

fact that America was both a freedom-loving and slave-holding society. The issue of slavery had impeded the further development of the nation.

Abraham Lincoln had long regarded slavery as an evil. He believed that slavery should be restricted and eventually abolished. In 1858, Lincoln declared that:

“ A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half-slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved-I do not expect the house to fall-but I do expect it will cease to be divided.”

### **3. 3. 1 Emancipation Proclamation**

Emancipation Proclamation was one of the greatest documents in American history. It played a significant role during the Civil War. The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation declared that all slaves in states rebelling against the Union were free. In practical terms, the proclamation had little immediate impact. It freed slaves only in the Confederate states, while leaving slavery intact in the Union. The final Emancipation Proclamation authorized the recruitment of African Americans into the union army.

Emancipation Proclamation was just the beginning of the efforts toward abolishment of slavery. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution adopted in 1865 by Congress finally abolished slavery.

### **3. 3. 2 Gettysburg Address**

The Gettysburg Address is a speech by President Abraham Lincoln and is one of the best-known speeches in history. It was delivered at the dedication of



the soldiers' national cemetery in Gettysburg. Battle of Gettysburg was regarded as the turning point in the Civil War. Lincoln invoked the principles of human equality stated by the Declaration and redefined the Civil War as a struggle not merely for the Union, but as " a new birth of freedom" that would bring true equality to all of its citizens and ensure the survival of American's democracy, that the " government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

### **3. 4 A Society of Affluence**

Between two great wars-the Civil War and the First World War-the United States came of age. In a period of less than 50 years it was transformed from a rural country to an urban nation. Great changes had taken place around the country.

The last decades of the 19th century were a period of imperial expansion for the United States. With the development of its power, America started to pursue its own national dream-to be a powerful country on the world stage. In order to safeguard its own interests, the United States had to stake out spheres of economic influence. More generally, the doctrine of " manifest destiny" first used to justify America's expansion.

Some Americans expressed their discontent with the character of modern life in the 1920s. The decade was called the Jazz Age, the Roaring Twenties, or the era of " flaming youth." World War I had overturned the traditional social and moral order. Mass prosperity enabled an open and hedonistic life style for the people.

The aftermath of World War II exacerbated the ethical shift as a consumer culture blossomed and Americans became preoccupied with material goods. As one critic noted, “consumed by desires for status, material goods, and acceptance, Americans apparently had lost the sense of individuality, thrift, hard work, and craftsmanship that had characterized the nation.” The result of this shift in work ethic had actually spurred rather than lessened the people’s desire to achieve the American Dream.

People lost their traditional values, beliefs and the motive force to success, and felt cheated by the society. They found that the dream in the past turned out to be an illusion; The American Dream didn’t exist at all.

### **3.5 The Disadvantaged Groups**

In the United States, any group other than the dominant white Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority is a minority group in American society. These racial and ethnic minorities mainly refer to the blacks, Native Americans, the Hispanics, and Asian Americans. Although they are the minority groups, they should have been treated equal and own the rights as same as the whites. They also have their desires for the American Dream. Take the blacks for instance; their dreams were deeply rooted in the American dream.

Although black slaves were emancipated as a result of the Civil War and granted basic civil rights according to the 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution, there was still a huge gap between the whites and blacks. During the mid-1950s, Civil Rights Movement reached its peak. Protest movement against racial segregation and discrimination became widespread in the southern America. This movement rooted in the centuries-long efforts

of African slaves and their descendents to resist racial oppression and abolish the institution of slavery.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a prominent leader in the Civil Rights Movement. He was famous for his work to end racial segregation and discrimination by the means of nonviolent methods. So he won his fame from the whole world and became a Nobel Peace Prize winner. King led the march on Washington, where he delivered his speech-I Have a Dream. From the words below, the cry for the black's American dream was obviously expressed.

“ I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘ We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.”

### **3. 6 A New Age**

#### **3. 6. 1The American Dream under the economic crisis**

The financial crisis from 2007 until now is considered to be the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The collapse of the housing bubble triggered the economic crisis which resulted in the bankruptcy of large financial institutions and downturns in stock markets all

around the world. It contributes to the large number of the unemployed, the decline of consumer wealth. Many families have no money to pay the debts of housing mortgage loan and lose the job to make a living. Americans have to face the fact that American Dream turned out to be an illusion once again. They have to sell out their cars and houses, cut down the expense of family and education for kids

Home ownership is one of the most important symbols in the traditional American Dream. But now the owner of the house is turning to the slave of the house. The people are tired of tax cuts for the wealthy that shift the burden to the backs of working people. They are tired of waiting years for the increase of wage while CEOs' pays are soaring. They are tired of living without health care and falling into poverty.

### **3. 6. 2 Barack Obama: Reclaiming the American Dream**

Barack Obama is the first African-American President in history. His story is regarded as an example of the American Dream. His father came from Kenya and mother was from Kansas. With the help from his grandparents, he was raised in Hawaii. Hard work and education were the means of getting ahead.

The year of 2008 was not only the year of election, but also in the midst of economic crisis. It's a period of hard time for most of Americans. During the presidential election, a lot of Americans were deeply touched by Barack Obama's election slogan " Change We Need". It aroused echoes in their hearts. Just as Obama said, " The time has come to bridge the growing divide between Main Street and Wall Street. The American Dream is slipping out of reach."

During the process of campaigning for President, Obama expressed the idea of reclaiming the American Dream many times. He believed that the American Dreams were worth fighting for because it belonged to every American.

It's the dream of his grandfather who serviced in the army and moved his family west in search of opportunity. It's the dream of his grandmother who got up at dawn and worked twice as hard at her job because a woman had to work harder to go ahead. It's the dream of his father who crossed an ocean because America offered the light to him. It's the dream of his mother who was a single mom and knew the meaning of life.

### **Chapter Four Comments on the American Dream**

The American Dream as the motive force has inspired Americans to chase the happiness and perfectness. On the other hand, there's no denying that the huge gap between dream and reality does exist. Many Americans have to face the fact that their dreams turn out to be nothing. After hundred years of development, the definition of American Dream has changed over the course of history. The spirit of thrift advocated by the Puritanism has been replaced by the extreme individualism. Many people and companies aspire to material wealth by hook or by crook regardless of justice and moral principles.

America was founded on the principle of human equality, but in practice the nation has fallen far short of that ideal. The inequality is not simply a matter of distinctions between social classes. The class divisions often parallel racial and ethnical divisions. American society is dominated by Anglo-Saxon

whites. They were the first settlers and quickly took control of economic assets and political power in America, and they have maintained this control until now. Immigrants from other nations have had to struggle hard to become assimilated into the mainstream of American life. Some have shared in the American Dream, but other disadvantaged groups have been excluded by different kinds of barriers from equal participation in American life. To a small number of people, they realize the American Dream and hav