The Evolution of the American Dream

There's a sense of skepticism about it now.

By Richard O'Mara
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Baltimore - What is the American dream today? It's a fair question in these times of financial and economic disorder and a less than harmonious political scene. The general election has stimulated references to it throughout the country. I want to know what all this dreaming is about.

Promises to revive, live up to, or simply abide by the standards of the American dream seem to flow more fluidly off the lips of people in high places, those who are already enjoying its supposed benign effects. Many ordinary people, I've found, refer to it reluctantly, and often with sarcasm. It's as if they regard it as a phrase with little concrete meaning, or an ideal betrayed.

As I began asking people about the American Dream, I saw a sense of cynicism. One of the people that I interviewed for this article could articulate the idea of the America Dream, but she believed that the American has already peaked in a way. Then, she went on to talk about this land of promise, where people could, with hard work, obtain a home of their own, gather enough money to send their children to college, and expect, under the benign influence of the American Dream, to do better than their parents did, and so forth. She explained the dream as it has been for generations.

In other words, she believes in it, but believes also that its time has come and gone.

I don't know how widespread this feeling is, but I suspect that a lot of ordinary folks, and more than a few serious thinkers, would tend to agree with my barber about the fate of the American dream.

"Many social critics would argue that what millions of Americans are really embracing is not the American dream so much as the American daydream. The authentic American dream combines faith in God with the belief in hard work and sacrifice for the future," writes economist and social thinker Jeremy Rifkin, author of "The End of Work" and "The European Dream." He continues, "We have become, say the critics, a people who have grown fat, lazy, and sedentary, who spend much of our time wishing for success but are unwilling to 'pay our dues' with the kind of personal commitment required to make something out of our lives."

At some point in our national history, back when the Pilgrims slipped ashore, an energized cohort of fiery Protestant preachers emerged to press the notion that we Americans had been singled out for greatness by God himself, an idea that stuffed us with national pride. Thus patriotism and religion were cojoined from the beginning, and, to a certain degree, the link is still there.

Benjamin Franklin imbued in us the zeal to work and encouraged the inclination for self-improvement. Then a little more than two centuries on, the sociologist Max Weber observed how the Calvanist emphasis on hard work, once driven by Puritan religious aims, had, over the years, stimulated the growth of capitalism. The religious element has since faded, and getting rich has become nearly the sole purpose driving the dream.
The collective dream of which we speak is a unique part of the American experience. I can think of no other country whose people asserted they have been chosen by God, except Israel. Most others beyond our shores seem baffled by it; some call it presumptuous. There is no English dream, Brazilian dream, no French or Chinese dreams. Are we the exception, alone to enjoy the comfort of our own dream? Very nearly so.

It was James Truslow Adams, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian with a foot in each of the past two centuries, who gave the name to the phenomenon he regarded as this country’s greatest achievement: the American dream, a democratic standard for the world.

The American dream, he wrote, is a "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and 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 a 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."

In his book, "The American Epic," Mr. Adams not only described the phenomenon of this "social order," but acknowledged that many had turned against it or distorted its purposes.

He admitted to its fragility and specifically cautioned against allowing it to develop into "A system that steadily increases the gulf between the ordinary man and the super-rich, that permits the resources of society to be gathered into personal fortunes that afford their owners millions of income a year...."

Certainly, just such a situation has evolved. Adams's words, published in 1931, early in the Great Depression, sound prophetic for our own times.

It seems that the American dream, indeed, has devolved into a "dream of motor cars and high [read: stratospheric] wages," and other excesses as he indicated. The future, as suggested by the disastrous collapse on Wall Street, does not look bright.

Even so, it is apparent that the American dream survives, at least in the bright mind of my barber, as her spontaneous and accurate description of it reveals.

She knows what it is and what it was: an ideal that grew out of an idea, maybe one waiting for its time to come again.

Richard O’Mara worked for 34 years as an editorial writer, foreign correspondent, and foreign editor of the Baltimore Sun.