

6	<i>America First 1920–1923:</i> The Simplicity of Government	105
7	<i>The American Dream 1924–1929:</i> A Willingness of the Heart	129
8	<i>America First 1923–1929:</i> A Super Patriot, Patriot	139

PART THREE 1930–1940

9	<i>The American Dream 1930–1934:</i> Das Dollarland	159
10	<i>America First 1930–1934:</i> The Official Recognition of Reality	173
11	<i>The American Dream 1934–1939:</i> The Pageant of History	187
12	<i>America First 1935–1939:</i> It Can Happen Here	213
13	<i>America First and the American Dream 1939–1941:</i> Americans! Wake Up!	241
	<i>Epilogue 1945–2017: Still America Firsting</i>	267
	<i>Coda</i>	285
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	291
	<i>Notes</i>	295
	<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	321
	<i>Index</i>	327

Photo section appears after page 156

Churchwell from Behold, America, pp. 1–5, 21–29

INTRODUCTION

THERE IS GREAT power in loaded phrases, as anyone willing to pull the trigger knows.

‘Sadly, the American dream is dead,’ Donald Trump proclaimed on 16 June 2015, announcing his candidacy for president of the United States. It seemed an astonishing thing for a candidate to say; people campaigning for president usually glorify the nation they hope to lead, flattering voters into choosing them. But this reversal was just a taste of what was to come, as Trump revealed an unnerving skill at twisting what would be negative for anyone else into a positive for himself.

By the time he won the election, Trump had flipped much of what many people thought they knew about America on its head. In his acceptance speech Trump again pronounced the American dream dead, but promised to revive it. We were told that the American dream of prosperity was under threat, so much so that a platform of ‘economic nationalism’ carried the presidency.

Reading last rites over the American dream was shocking enough. But throughout the campaign Trump also promised to put ‘America first’, a pledge renewed in his inaugural speech in January 2017. It was a disquieting phrase for a presidential candidate, and then president-elect, to keep

using. Think pieces on the history of 'America first' began to sprout up in the national press and on social media, informing their audiences that the slogan 'America first' stretches back to the Second World War, and to the efforts of the America First Committee to keep the United States out of the European conflict. 'America first' had been invented by high-profile isolationists like Charles Lindbergh, they explained, whose sympathy with the Nazi project was often inextricable from an avowed anti-Semitism. 'America first', they said, was a code for neo-Nazism.

Meanwhile, other pundits were weighing in on the American dream, as writers asked if it was indeed dead.¹ Nearly all of these pieces began with a shared understanding of what the American dream was supposed to entail: namely, upward social mobility, a national promise of endless individual progress. But now, thanks to epidemic levels of inequality, that dream was widely viewed as under threat, a story that had been endlessly recycled across the international press for the decade since the financial crisis beginning in 2007. Trump had weaponised this inequality, they said, convincing his followers that only an outsider could redeem a corrupt system. (That he was in fact a plutocratic insider, a self-styled billionaire corporate tycoon, was hardly the last bit of cognitive dissonance his followers were prepared to disavow.)

But most did not question what the American dream meant; they only debated its relative health. A *Guardian* editorial from June 2017, for example, called 'Is the American Dream Really Dead?', summed up not only the questions everyone was asking, but the premises from which they began.

The United States has a long-held reputation for exceptional tolerance of income inequality, explained by its high levels of social mobility. This combination underpins the American dream – initially conceived of by Thomas Jefferson as each citizen's right to the pursuit of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This dream is not about guaranteed outcomes, of course, but the pursuit of opportunities . . . Yet the opportunity to

live the American dream is much less widely shared today than it was several decades ago.²

Few would dispute any of this: the American dream is widely understood as a dream of personal opportunity, in which 'opportunity' is gauged primarily in economic terms, and those opportunities are shrinking. The idea that the American dream was 'initially conceived' by Jefferson is similarly axiomatic, despite the fact that happiness and opportunity are not, in fact, synonymous.

° But what Jefferson conceived – at least in terms of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – was a dream of democratic equality. He doesn't mention economics, or opportunity, for good reason. In fact, Jefferson took John Locke's phrase, 'life, liberty and property', and changed property into happiness. While it is true that in the eighteenth century 'happiness' was often used to mean 'flourishing', which can clearly imply prosperity, Jefferson nonetheless removed specific economic guarantees from the nation's founding entitlements. Democratic equality and economic opportunity are not the same thing, but the American dream has, for decades, been used as if they are.

The *Guardian* piece ends by noting the self-defeating nature of the 'dream' as understood in these terms. 'Ironically, part of the problem may actually *be* the American dream . . . Indeed, the dream, with its focus on individual initiative in a meritocracy, has resulted in far less public support than there is in other countries for safety nets, vocational training, and community support for those with disadvantage or bad luck.' The dream is of the individual capitalist striving in a free-market world, one that is inimical to the 'safety nets' of social democracy. Again, this understanding of the dream is entirely typical of how it is construed today – not just by Americans, but around the world.

But although this meaning of the dream is unquestionably the one Americans inherited, this book will show that it is exactly the reverse of the ideas the 'American dream' was coined to advance. Gradually in 2017

a few writers began to notice that the American dream had once included higher dreams of personal fulfilment, beyond the wish to live in an up-to-date department store (as an American historian put it back in 1933).³ But its reduction to sheer materialism is, in fact, the least of the expression's changes in meaning.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines the American dream as 'the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative'. Certainly Americans have always built individual aspiration into a mythology. But upward social mobility is not an idea associated with the expression the 'American dream' until much later than most people think – a fact that has profound implications for the cultural and political fight the US (and indeed much of the West) now finds itself in, for how America sees itself and its own promises.

The received wisdoms about 'America first' are similarly misunderstood or delimited – including those offered by eminent historians. Timothy Snyder gave a highly representative description of 'America first' in a 2017 interview, explaining – as nearly every pundit has – that 'America first' goes back to the Second World War. 'Trump and Bannon's idea of "America First" is technically from 1940,' Snyder stated, 'but it is meant as nostalgia for the period before America entered the world in WWII and before the welfare state. The "America First" movement included many populists and white supremacists.'⁴ While it is true that 'America first' always included many populists and white supremacists, it is not true that it emerged in response to the welfare state that was created in the 1930s, or that it represented a nostalgia for the period before the 1930s. In fact, the phrase was popularised well before the 1930s, and the nostalgias it represented were considerably more complicated than this abbreviated, widely recycled, version of its origins suggests.

By 1940 'America first' had been entangled in America's political narrative for decades. Charles Lindbergh and the America First Committee of 1940 were not the beginning of the story of 'America first'. They were the end – until Donald Trump resuscitated the term.

And the American dream isn't dead, either – we just have no idea what it means any more.

Behold, America tells the history of these two loaded phrases, a tale that upends much of what we thought we knew about both, perhaps even about America itself.

It turns out that 'America first' and the 'American dream' were always connected, and contested, terms in a nation finding its way. A nation losing its way might do well to contest these terms once more.

HISTORY RARELY STARTS when we think it did, and it never seems to end when we think it should. Nor does it tend to say what we think it will. The phrases 'American dream' and 'America first' were born almost exactly a century ago – and rapidly tangled over capitalism, democracy and race, the three fates always spinning America's destiny.

Received wisdoms can become self-fulfilling prophecies – loaded dice, rigging the conversation. When what's on the table are national values, and our language obscures from us important truths about those values, the stakes grow very high. Returning to original sources can overturn those common wisdoms, exposing the gaps between what we tell each other that history shows, and what it actually says.

Behold, America offers a genealogy of national debates around these two expressions, most of which have been forgotten. The evolution of these two sayings – both their myths and their truths – has shaped reality in ways not fully understood. We cannot register the subtexts of our own slogans if we do not recognize their contexts; we risk misreading our own moment if we don't know the historical meanings of expressions we resuscitate, or perpetuate. We cannot hear a dog whistle if we are not in its range.

Phrases can form chains of association, conceptual paths that the mind follows intuitively, even unconsciously, as one word, or idea, seems to lead naturally to another. Those chains of association help define political and

THE AMERICAN DREAM 1900–1916: THE SPIRIT OF AMERICAN DREAMS

BEWARE RESENTFUL MULTIMILLIONAIRES, for they will destroy the American dream.

That, in a nutshell, was the warning issued by an article in the *New York Evening Post* in 1900, which cautioned readers that ‘discontented multimillionaires’ form the ‘greatest risk’ to ‘every republic’. The problem was that multimillionaires ‘are very rarely, if ever, content with a position of equality’. But if the rich were to be treated differently from other Americans, ‘it would be the end of the American dream’.¹

The article, reprinted in regional papers around the country, argued that multimillionaires insist on special privileges, their own rules, demanding to be treated as an elite class. All previous republics had been ‘overthrown by rich men’, it added, and America seemed to have plenty who were ready to wreak havoc on democracy without consequence, ‘deriding the constitution, unrebuked by the executive or by public opinion’.²

As it happens, this forgotten editorial in the newspaper established by Alexander Hamilton appears to be one of the earliest uses of the phrase the ‘American dream’ in a context we would recognise. And instead of

assuming that multimillionaires are the realisation of the American dream, it says their lack of belief in the equality upon which republics are founded will destroy it.

Most Americans today almost certainly believe the opposite: that a multimillionaire proves the success of the American dream. But in 1900 the *Post*'s editorial writer presumed that everyone would agree that the 'American dream' was of equality, and that wealth would kill it. And local newspapers around the country reprinted the item – from Wilmington, North Carolina, to Galena, Kansas, to Santa Cruz, California – suggesting they found currency in it.

Before about 1900, there is little discernible trace in American cultural conversations of the phrase 'American dream' being used to describe a collective, generalisable national ideal of any kind, let alone an economic one.

The phrase does not appear in any of the foundational documents in American history – it's nowhere in the complete writings of Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton or James Madison. It's not in Hector St. John Crèvecoeur or Alexis de Tocqueville, those two great French observers of early American life. It's not found in the works of any of America's major nineteenth-century novelists: Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville or Mark Twain. It's not in the supposedly more sentimental novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, or even Horatio Alger, whose 'rags to riches' stories are so often held to exemplify it. Nor does it crop up visibly in political discourse, or newspapers, or anywhere noticeable in the public record.

There were references in newspaper articles or histories to specific, particular American dreams: the American dream of naval supremacy, or the American dream of continental expansion (a dream that 'proceeds from a sense of social and political superiority', a New York paper helpfully explained in 1877).³ A New Orleans paper reported that a new interest in recreational sports marked a change in 'the spirit of American dreams'.⁴ A story that Napoleon had been urged to flee to the United States was reprinted around the country in 1880 under the headline 'Napoleon's American Dream'.⁵

There was the American dream of rehabilitating China.⁶ There was the (surprising) 'bastard American dream of Empire' in the Philippines, as well as the 'pan-American dream' of hemispheric travel, or conquest.⁷ By 1906, 'the American dream of a republic in Cuba appear[ed] to be over'.⁸ 'Mexico in American hands is the American dream,' readers were told in 1916.⁹ There was even the 'American dream of a railway project through Anatolia' as late as 1922.¹⁰

Most of these American dreams are noteworthy primarily for the fact that they have little or nothing to do with life in the United States, its values or meanings. Often the expression denoted dreams of empire – but it was always a distinct, individual dream of what activities America might get up to, not a collective sense of what it might be, or mean.

In these earliest years of the phrase's appearance in print, there were only a handful of invocations of 'the' American dream, rather than 'an' American dream, because there were so many to choose from. And when 'the' American dream did appear, it was almost always in contexts that make it clear the phrase was not being used to denote anything about individual aspiration or economic opportunity at all. But those are the meanings that are universally ascribed to the phrase today, with no sense that it could ever have meant anything else.

Certainly the individual pursuit of prosperity, the self-made man, the success story were all familiar American ideals, as the immense popularity in the second half of the nineteenth century of Horatio Alger's books about impoverished boys rising to middle-class prosperity does attest. But the 'Alger ethic', as it's been called, of rags-to-riches meritocratic bootstrapping was not associated with anything named the 'American dream' until much later.¹¹

Instead, there were references to the American dream of liberty under representative democracy, the American dream of self-government,¹² or the American dreams of the poets Southey and Coleridge, who imagined a utopia there. The earliest iterations of the phrase 'American dream' tended to use it to describe the political dreams of the framers, the dreams of liberty, justice and equality.

The problem for the United States has always been how to reconcile the three. Liberty is in tension against both justice and equality: one person's freedom to pursue property or power soon infringes upon principles of social justice and democratic equality. The friction has remained, but the 'American dream' would switch sides, as we shall see. Today the phrase is used all but exclusively to denote an individual's pursuit of property, whereas when it first crept into American political discourse, it did so to represent the social dream of justice and equality *against* individual dreams of aspiration and personal success.

From the early years of America's history the nation's political dreams have also been referred to as the 'American creed', the belief system that broadly fused liberal democracy, individual opportunity, equality, liberty and justice. The problem wasn't merely how to square these principles with each other, given how often they come into conflict. It was also how to balance a doctrine of explicitly stated values against the behaviours of individual Americans that implicitly betrayed those ideals on a daily basis.

As early as 1845 another *New York Evening Post* editorial was widely circulated, objecting to the fact that a new political movement called nativism was contrary to Americanism and the American creed. 'The great principle of true *Americanism*, if we may use the word, is, that merit makes the man,' it observed. Because people should never be judged by 'purely accidental' distinctions, but only by personal characteristics, any form of nativism was 'contemptible' bigotry, based on 'low and ungenerous prejudices – prejudices of birth, which we as a people, profess to discard'.

What is the effort to confine the political functions incident to citizenship to native-born Americans, but the attempt to found an aristocracy of birth, even a political aristocracy, making the accident of birth the condition of political rights. Is this Americanism? Shame on the degenerate American who pretends it! He is false to his American creed, and has no American heart.¹³

As a concept, Americanism would not get appreciably better at remembering its creed, or having a heart, but many individual Americans, believing in an inclusive polity established (at least in theory) by the framers, would continue to make principled appeals for tolerance, justice and equality. At stake was the character of modern America, whether it would be shaped by tribal loyalties or constitutional principles.

THE EARLIEST USE. I have found of the 'American dream' to denote a mutual value system – one akin to the older idea of the American creed – is from 1895, when a celebration was held in Chicago on what would have been the seventy-third birthday of Ulysses S. Grant. The festivities included a (very long) commemorative oration thanking Grant for protecting the Union, first as a general in the Civil War and then as president. At one point, the orator turned his expansive attention to the character of the nation Grant was being lauded for having saved:

Oh, critic and cynic, dreamer and doubter, behold America, as this day she stands before her history and her heroes. See her millions of people, her free institutions, her equal laws, her generous opportunities, her schoolhouses and her churches; you see misfortunes and defects, for not yet is fully realized the American dream; you surely see her mighty progress toward the fulfillment of her philosophy.¹⁴

The nature of that unrealised dream, that unfulfilled philosophy, is unspecified, taken as a given – but a shared value was being assumed. The national philosophy being summoned is obviously not limited to economic success or upward social mobility: this is a speech about the ideal of American democracy, of which 'generous opportunities' are just one aspect, alongside institutional freedom, religious freedom, equality under the law and universal education.

And when the 'American dream' was used in a context that referred to economic prosperity, the expression usually suggested that the accumulation of wealth was 'un-American', that the American dream was opposed to economic inequality and laissez-faire capitalism.

In 1899 the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* published an item criticising a Vermont landowner's decision to build an estate of four thousand acres with sixty rooms, which would make it the largest individual property in America. 'Until a few years ago the thought of such an estate as that would have seemed a wild and utterly un-American dream to any Vermonter,' protested the reporter. Vermont had always been 'a state of almost ideally democratic equality, where everybody worked and nobody went hungry'.¹⁵

If the concentration of wealth was an 'un-American dream', then preserving the American dream would mean resisting individual success at the expense of others. This vision looks a lot more like social democracy than free-market capitalism – and it's a vision that continues through the earliest uses of the phrase.

A Kansas editorial asked in 1908 why a baseball pitcher earned twenty times more than a settlement worker, why the president of an insurance company made so much more than a headmaster. 'Why does the world offer fortunes to the man who shows us how to make money and starvation wages to the man who shows us how to make beautiful lives? Why do we accord highest place to money mongers and lowest place to teachers of ideals?' False standards were leading people astray; but 'thank goodness, a change is coming over the spirit of American dreams'. The country was beginning to concern itself with more than 'the material things'. Having 'solved the problems of the production of wealth', 'now we must stop!' The country had bigger problems than making money, contended that editorial from the American heartland. It was time to enable 'the equitable distribution of wealth'.¹⁶

Enough Americans had been dreaming of material wealth for an editorial to praise a change in their spirit; there is no question that American energies have always been focused on acquisition, but the idea of the 'American dream' was summoned as a corrective, not as an incentive.

Individual Americans' dreams would need to improve to live up to national ideals of equality and justice, or toxic inequity would blight the American dream of democracy.

IT WAS THE heart of the so-called Progressive Era (roughly 1890 to 1920), which responded to the Gilded Age of unregulated capitalism with clashes between labour and industry, and a series of attempts (mostly frustrated) at economic reform. In the 1890s severe financial crashes and recessions led to soaring inequality; riots ensued. Droughts were ravaging the upper Midwest: the notorious Dust Bowl of the 1930s was presaged by the terrible droughts of the 1890s forty years earlier. Monopoly capitalism had taken such a stranglehold over the United States that in 1890 Congress passed the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, the first major federal law to regulate the power that giant corporations could exert over ordinary Americans – and over government itself. In 1893 a financial panic led the nation to debate the creation of federal aid programmes, which the United States had never enacted. That same year, President Grover Cleveland denounced governmental 'paternalism' in his second inaugural address, informing the nation that 'while the people should patriotically and cheerfully support their Government its functions do not include the support of the people'.¹⁷

Republican Theodore Roosevelt was elected in 1900 on a progressive platform promising, in the name of free markets, to 'bust the trusts' – the massive national corporations that were consolidating industrial power, making it impossible for small businesses to compete, and were seen as eroding the foundations of the middle classes. At the turn of the twentieth century in the United States, the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer, despite the incremental growth of the middle class.

National conversations were highly attuned to the rampaging inequality created by industrial robber barons and monopoly capitalism. A few months before Theodore Roosevelt announced his candidacy, a widely reviewed book called *The City for the People* argued:

A hundred years ago wealth was quite evenly distributed here. Now one-half the people own practically nothing; one-eighth of the people own seven-eighths of the wealth; one per cent of the people own fifty per cent of the wealth and one-half of one per cent own twenty per cent of the wealth, or 4,000 times their fair share in the principles of partnership and brotherhood. A hundred years ago there were no millionaires in the country. Now there are more than 4,000 millionaires and multimillionaires, one of them worth over two hundred millions, and the billionaire is only a question of a few years more.¹⁸

Monopolies were fundamentally opposed to social good, it said. 'Diffusion is the ideal of civilization, diffusion of wealth and power, intelligence, culture, and conscience.' But instead of diffusion, America had created 'private monopoly of wealth, private monopoly of government, private monopoly of education, private monopoly even of morality, and the conditions of its production.'¹⁹ The *Labor World* in Duluth, Minnesota, protested 'the spectacle of one per cent of our families owning more wealth than all of the remaining 99 per cent!'²⁰

The symbol of the 'one per cent' that so dominates discussions of economic inequality today comes, like the American dream it accompanies, from a century ago. The difference is that a hundred years ago many people considered billionaires un-American.

That's where the story of the 'American dream' as a saying begins – in the Progressive Era, protesting inequality. After a few decades of scattered references to particular American dreams of sovereignty or conquest, the phrase began to coalesce, used in an increasingly consistent way by people around the country to remind Americans of a shared ideal about equality of opportunity – which may sound like our American dream of individual success. But for them the American dream of equal opportunity could only be protected by *curbing* unbridled capitalism, and protecting collective equality.

When they invoked the American dream it was a sign of moral disquiet, not triumphalism, reflecting the fear that America was losing its

way. The phrase was a warning siren, reminding Americans to look at the ground upon which they stood – not towards nebulous dreams of individual future advancement, but back towards the nation's shared founding values.

That American attitudes were changing in response to the growth of monopoly capitalism was clear to all; wealth was no longer an easy virtue to pursue. It had become a test for American society.

Soon even the *Manchester Guardian* was noting that although a 'loose individualism' balanced by Hamiltonian federalism had long been the 'chief substance of Americanism', shifting circumstances 'caused a change to pass over the spirit of this American dream'. Opportunities for 'the ordinary man' were becoming more restricted, while 'economic, social, and political potentates have arisen in the shape of trusts, bosses, railroads, labour unions', meaning that 'a wide gulf has opened up between wealth-ownership and the condition of the workers'.²¹

Again there was a sense that 'the spirit of the American dream' was undergoing a dangerous alteration, and that change involved the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few; again the 'American dream' described not the accumulation of riches, but the risk posed to ideals of justice and equality by such accumulation.

As the American dream began to develop into a popular way to articulate a collective national ideal, the phrase was used to talk about stopping the rich and powerful from destroying democratic equality, and with it economic opportunity for all.

The American dream is usually imagined today as a nostalgic return to some golden past of national prosperity and harmony, in which happy small capitalists ran an agrarian, softly mercantile society and professionals earned the same as farmers, and everyone was content. But if you examine the actual history of the phrase, you find a society always grappling with inequality, uneasily recognising that individual success would not redeem collective failure.
