INTRODUCTION: A DREAM COUNTRY

I have learned this, at least, from my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854

THAT TITLE WON'T WORK, James Truslow Adams was told. No one will pay three dollars for a book about a dream.

Adams, author of a series of popular books on American history—think of him as the David McCullough or Ken Burns of the 1930s—was seeking to broaden his literary horizons. A man with elite bloodlines dating back to the seventeenth century, when one of his ancestors came to Virginia as an indentured servant and ended up in the landowning class, Adams, born in 1878, had nevertheless grown up under relatively modest circumstances. (His father was an unsuccessful Wall Street broker.) After graduating from Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute in 1898 and earning a master's degree in philosophy at Yale in 1900, he went to work on Wall Street himself, making enough money to devote himself to writing. His local histories of Long Island brought him some renown and attracted the attention of presidential adviser Col. Edward M. House, who hired him to assemble data for the Paris Peace Conference following World War I, which he attended as a cartographer in the American delegation. After the war, Adams wrote his "New England trilogy"—which included the Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Founding of New England* (1921)—and gained scholarly recognition for *Provincial Society, 1690–1763* (1927), a volume in the highly regarded

"History of American Life" series edited by Dixon Ryan Fox and Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., leading academic historians. He was now poised to become the premier popularizer of his day.

Adams wanted to write a one-volume history of the United States for the general reader, and his publisher, Little, Brown, agreed. As he noted in the preface, there was no shortage of such books. What he wanted to contribute was a broad interpretive sensibility that emphasized important historical themes. For Adams, no theme was more important than what he called

> that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world. That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming it.

Writing in the early years of the Great Depression—the book was published as *The Epic of America* in 1931—Adams sensed he was living on the cusp of such an uprising. "Possibly the greatest of these struggles lies just ahead of us at this present time—not a struggle of revolutionists against the established order, but of the ordinary man to hold fast to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' which were vouchsafed to us in the past in vision and on parchment." As it turned out, Adams was deeply disillusioned by Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal, feeling they represented a betrayal of American traditions of autonomy and a case of government collusion in the creation of a soulless, materialistic consumer society. Though he would remain popular for the rest of the decade, Adams was increasingly out of step with the temper of his times, and he died, disappointed with his country, in 1948.

In retrospect, it seems odd that Adams was talked out of his wish to call his most popular book *The American Dream*. While it's not clear whether he actually coined the term or appropriated it from someone else, his publisher's reluctance to use it suggests "American Dream" was not in widespread use elsewhere. In any event, Adams invoked it over thirty times in *The Epic of America*, and the phrase rapidly entered common parlance as a byword for what he thought his country was all about, not only in the United States but in the rest of the world. So in this regard it is notable that the edition of the book I happened to

pluck off the shelf at the Harvard College library came from a 1941 edition stamped as the property of an army educational supervisor stationed in Europe: the American Dream had become a weapon in the fight against Hitler (and later Stalin). One can only wonder that there was once a moment when the words "American Dream" could be dismissed as obscure or unappealing.

Times change. When, in an early phase of this project, I typed those words into a library catalog, I got back over seven hundred titles: *Education and the American Dream; Tenants and the American Dream; Advertising the American Dream; The American Dream and the Popular Novel; The Endangered American Dream; Prisoners of the American Dream;* and so on. None of the books I looked at makes anything like a systematic attempt to define the term or trace its origins; its definition is virtually taken for granted. It's as if no one feels compelled to fix the meanings and uses of a term everyone presumably understands—which today appears to mean that in the United States anything is possible if you want it badly enough.

Actually, "American Dream" has long since moved beyond the relatively musty domain of print culture into the incandescent glow of the mass media, where it is enshrined as our national motto. Jubilant athletes declaim it following championship games. Aspiring politicians invoke it as the basis of their candidacies. Otherwise sober businessmen cite achieving it as the ultimate goal of their enterprises. The term seems like the most lofty as well as the most immediate component of an American identity, a birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like "democracy," "Constitution," or even "the United States."

The omnipresence of "the American Dream" stems from a widespread—though not universal—belief that the concept describes something very contemporary. At the same time, however, much of its vitality rests on a premise, which I share, that it is part of a long tradition. In this view, the Pilgrims may not have actually talked about the American Dream, but they would have understood the idea: after all, they lived it as people who imagined a destiny for themselves. So did the Founding Fathers. So did illiterate immigrants who could not speak English but intuitively expressed rhythms of the Dream with their hands and their hearts. What Alexis de Tocqueville called "the charm of anticipated success" in his classic *Democracy in America* seemed palpable to him not only in the 1830s but in his understanding of American history for two hundred years before that. And it still seems so almost two hundred years later.

In the twenty-first century, the American Dream remains a major element of our national identity, and yet national identity is itself marked by a sense of uncertainty that may well be greater than ever before. Over the course of human history, peoples have used any number of means to identify themselves: blood, religion, language, geography, a shared history, or some combination of these. (Japan comes to mind as an example that draws on all of them.) Yet the United States was essentially a creation of the collective imagination—inspired by the existence of a purportedly New World, realized in a Revolution that began with an explicitly articulated Declaration, and consolidated in the writing of a durable Constitution. And it is a nation that has been re-created as a deliberate act of conscious choice every time a person has landed on these shores. Explicit allegiance, not involuntary inheritance, is the theoretical basis of American identity.

To be sure, the United States has also benefited from some of the glue that holds together other nations. But at the turn of the century, some of that social cement is loosening. In some ways, large transnational institutions like corporations shape the lives of ordinary citizens far more than local government does. Economic and racial stratification have grown markedly, raising doubts about the breadth and depth of opportunity. And amid the greatest surge of immigration in our history, one that brings more people from more of the world than ever before, we don't always speak the same language. At a time like this, the American Dream becomes a kind of lingua franca, an idiom that everyone—from corporate executives to hip-hop artists—can presumably understand.

Indeed, one of the more remarkable things about the Dream is its hold on those one might think are most likely to be skeptical, even hostile, toward it. In her 1996 book *Facing Up to the American Dream,* political scientist Jennifer Hochschild compiles data suggesting that working-class black Americans, for example, believe in it with an intensity that baffles and even appalls more affluent African Americans, who see the dream as an opiate that lulls people into ignoring the structural barriers that prevent collective as well as personal advancement.

This book grows out of a belief that any attempt to assess the possibilities and limits of the American Dream requires a more thorough reckoning than we customarily give it. Such a reckoning begins with a recognition that the Dream is neither a reassuring verity nor an empty bromide but rather a complex idea with manifold implications that can

cut different ways. Some of those implications involve the oft-overlooked costs of dreaming. The unfulfilled yearnings of Jimmy Stewart's character in *It's a Wonderful Life,* for example, are never quite erased by the movie's happy ending. The failure of countless social reforms in this country, which founder on the confidence of individual citizens that *they* will be the ones who overcome the odds and get rich, is one of the great themes of American politics. And we've all heard stories about celebrities who find themselves overwhelmed by the very success they so fiercely pursued—and attained. On the other hand, simply *having* a dream has sustained, even saved, lives that otherwise might not be deemed worth living.

The American Dream would have no drama or mystique if it were a self-evident falsehood or a scientifically demonstrable principle. Ambiguity is the very source of its mythic power, nowhere more so than among those striving for, but unsure whether they will reach, their goals. Yet resolution may not afford clarity, either. Those who fail may confront troubling, even unanswerable, questions: Do I blame myself? Bad luck? The unattainability of the objective? Such uncertainty may be no less haunting for the successful, who may also question the basis of their success – and its price.

Beyond such considerations, a reckoning with the Dream also involves acknowledging another important reality: that beyond an abstract belief in possibility, there is no *one* American Dream. Instead, there are many American *Dreams*, their appeal simultaneously resting on their variety and their specificity. What James Truslow Adams called in the epilogue of *The Epic of America* "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man" may be fine as far as it goes, but the devil is in the details: just what does "better and richer and fuller" *mean*?

The answers vary. Sometimes "better and richer and fuller" is defined in terms of money—in the contemporary United States, one could almost believe this is the *only* definition—but there are others. Religious transformation, political reform, educational attainment, sexual expression: the list is endless. These answers have not only been available at any given time; they have also changed over time and competed for the status of common sense.

This book explores a few varieties of the American Dream: their origins, their dynamics, their ongoing relevance. It does so by describing a series of specific American dreams in a loosely chronological,

overlapping order. I begin with what I regard as the first great American Dream, that of small groups of English religious dissenters who traversed an ocean seeking a way of worshipping God as they saw fit. Their dream was one of manifold ironies, not the least of which involved their clearing a space for subsequent generations to come and pursue aspirations they would have found reprehensible—if they could comprehend them at all.

I then proceed to examine what I call the charter of the American Dream: the Declaration of Independence. This political manifesto was the cornerstone of the American Revolution, the justification for a small group of men to seize the reins of power from the British. But almost despite itself and the intentions of the men who signed it, the Declaration resonated far beyond such relatively narrow aims; my point is to show that notwithstanding the almost impossible remoteness (and ambiguity) surrounding its creation, the document has an immediacy and appeal that has coursed through the marrow of everyday life ever since.

From there, I turn to one of the most familiar American Dreams: that of upward mobility, a dream typically understood in terms of economic and/or social advancement. This too took root early. At the locus of this chapter is a man widely regarded as the greatest American: Abraham Lincoln. Though Lincoln's career is typically understood in terms of the ending of slavery or the preserving of the Union, I argue that for him both were means to a larger end: sustaining the American Dream. Lincoln's rise from obscurity to the pinnacle of American life—and, in particular, the remorseless clarity with which he finally came to understand the dream he embodied—makes him a uniquely compelling lens through which to understand the possibilities and limits of upward mobility.

Moving on to the post–Civil War era, specifically the notorious *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896, I discuss what I regard as one of the most noteworthy—and unsuccessful—of all American Dreams: the quest for equality, focusing specifically on the struggle of African Americans. This chapter culminates with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and especially the great civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. It was King's genius to define his struggle in terms of what a foreign observer once dubbed "the American Creed"—a series of shared ideals that, like the Declaration of Independence, helped define the American Dream in the popular imagination (and

made it difficult for his opponents to resist him). It was also his achievement to compellingly define that dream in terms of something more than individual fulfillment.

I then look at the most widely realized American Dream: home ownership. Once again, this is an old dream; I pay special attention to the way it took shape in the years from the passage of the Homestead Act (signed by Lincoln in 1862) to the flowering of suburbia in the second half of the twentieth century. The triumph of the suburban dream has had consequences that have been both deeply reassuring and deeply troubling.

Which brings me to my final American Dream. This is also a dream of personal fulfillment, albeit of a very different kind than that of the Puritans or Abraham Lincoln. Like the others, its roots go back to the origins of American life, from the so-called adventurers seeking sudden fortunes on the plantations of Virginia to the speculators mining their prospects in western cities like Las Vegas. But nowhere does this dream come more vividly into focus than in the culture of Hollywood—a semi-mythic place where, unlike in the Dream of Upward Mobility, fame and fortune were all the more compelling if achieved without obvious effort. This is the most alluring and insidious of American Dreams, and one that seems to have become predominant at the start of the twenty-first century.

This by no means exhausts the list, of course. Indeed, as you read you may note any number of omissions, even begin to map out additional varieties of the American Dream. If so, then the book will have succeeded on some important level, as its goal is to be suggestive rather than exhaustive.

As with many dreams that become a reality, much about this book has turned out differently than I expected. (A project that began as a history of American patriotism has turned into something else that took much longer, and was much harder, to produce.) One of the things I realized in writing it is that the American Dream is closely bound up with freedom and that this book had willy-nilly become a kind of exploration of that concept as well. For a while, I resisted this tendency, in large measure because I believe freedom today has largely become a slogan for marketers and conservative ideologues eager to enlist it in their causes. (As members of some think tanks like to remind us, the American Revolution was a tax revolt.) But it is now clearer to me than ever before that freedom has meant many different, even con-

tradictory, things in American history—as when we're told, for example, that we protect out freedoms by surrendering our privacy or civil liberties. The pluralistic nature of freedom can be a source of frustration, but also a source of hope.

However variegated its applications—which include the freedom *to* commit as well as freedom *from* commitment—all notions of freedom rest on a sense of *agency*, the idea that individuals have control over the course of their lives. Agency, in turn, lies at the very core of the American Dream, the bedrock premise upon which all else depends. To paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, the Dream assumes that one *can* advance confidently in the direction of one's dreams to live out an imagined life. One of the greatest ironies—perhaps *the* greatest—of the American Dream is that its foundations were laid by people who specifically rejected a belief that they *did* have control over their destinies. In its broadest sense, you might say that the narrative arc of this book begins with people who denied their efforts could affect their fates, moves through successors who later declared independence to get that chance, to heirs who elaborated a gospel of self-help promising they could shape their fates with effort, and ends with people who long to achieve dreams without having to make any effort at all. This is, of course, a simplification, in part because all these types have been around at every point in the last four hundred years. But such an encapsulation does suggest the changing tenor of national life, and suggests too the variety, quantitative as well as qualitative, that has marked the history of the American Dream. I hope it also suggests the role a sense of humility can play in grappling with an idea that seems to envelop us as unmistakably as the air we breathe.

CHAPTER I

DREAM OF THE GOOD LIFE (I): THE PURITAN ENTERPRISE

FEW PEOPLE in American history have been as consistently disliked as the Puritans. To be sure, they have always had relatively rare, if prominent, champions (usually direct heirs). And they have often received grudging respect for their tenacity. But that's about as far as it goes. Some figures, like the Founding Fathers, quickly ascended into our pantheon of heroes; others, like leading Confederates of the Civil War, have had fluctuating reputations; still others, like the presidents of the late nineteenth century, rapidly fell into deserved obscurity. But the Puritans have had a consistently bad reputation that stands out like a scarlet letter in collective national memory.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, and most generally, the Puritans are widely regarded as very unpleasant people. Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible,* which used the Salem witch trials of the seventeenth century as a metaphor for the McCarthyite witch hunts of the twentieth century, remains a fixture of high school literature classes, providing millions of American schoolchildren their most vivid image of Puritanism. The word "puritanical" is still in wide usage in the early twenty-first century, usually as a synonym for intolerance, and knowledgeable observers at home and abroad have attributed American prurience and self-righteousness (typified, to many, by the sex scandal