

*The Slow Death of
the American Dream*

MY FATHER, Milton, was born in Denver, Colorado, in 1908. My mother, Vivette, was born three years later in El Paso, Texas, just this side of the Mexican border. They were among the last generation to grow up during a time when cowboys still roamed the range, although in greatly diminished numbers, and the frontier was still fresh in people's minds. My parents were Westerners. They were weaned on that very special catechism that we have come to know as the American Spirit. My parents' worldview was uncomplicated and very much the product of the frontier mentality. My mother would tuck me in at night, and instead of reading me childhood stories about goblins and fairies, she would recount the day's activities, of what had been accomplished and what was left to be done, always leaving me with a sense of anticipation of what exciting things lay ahead the next day. I could hardly wait. My mother believed that each person had a destiny. We are each chosen to make something out of ourselves, to contribute something to the world. But for her, destiny was not fate, but rather opportunity waiting to be seized and acted upon. Whether one lived out one's destiny depended on how strongly one believed in his or her ability to affect the world.

My mother used every situation as a pretext to push home the principle that guided her life and the lives of so many Americans of her era. She would say to me, "Jeremy, in America, you can do anything you choose to do and be anyone you choose to be, if you want to do it or be it badly enough." Personal willpower, for my mom, was the force that opened up the door to all the possibilities of the future. "Believe in yourself," she would say, "and you will be able to move mountains." Of course, for my mom's generation, still close to America's frontier past, all of this just seemed to make common sense. A half century later, when such exhortations began to fade from the collective memory, educators, psychiatrists, and parents began to re-introduce them in a more structured if not artificial way, in the form of "self-esteem" seminars and instruction. But, in the new contrived context, the exercise seems a bit too desperate, perhaps because it lacks any kind of historical context or mission. Self-esteem has come to mean "feeling good about oneself," often without any specific end in mind.

While my mom provided the inspiration to allow my imagination to take flight, it was my dad who provided the measure of American realism and practicality to make my dreams come true. He would say, "Son, a lot of people dream of doing great things, but what separates the dreamers from the doers is discipline and hard work." Then he would invariably attach his own sense of statistical probability to the chances of success. "My boy, always remember that success in life is the result of ninety-nine percent hard work and one percent talent . . . and don't ever forget, no one is ever going to hand you success in life or give you something for nothing. You are on your own."

A Nation of Dreamers

There you have it. The American Credo. These are the aphorisms that most little boys—fewer girls—grew up on, at least until very recently. I have asked many of my European friends if their parents passed on similar teachings, only to be greeted with puzzled expressions. So, I suspect that this particular legacy is uniquely American.

It's interesting to note that although people have been living the American Dream for two centuries, the term didn't become part of the popular lexicon until 1931. Historian James Truslow Adams published a

book entitled *The Epic of America*, in which the term "American Dream" was used for the very first time.¹ Adams originally wanted to use the term in the title of the book, but his editor, Ellery Sedgwick, refused, saying that "no red-blooded American would pay \$3.50 for a dream."² Adams's retort at the time was that "red-blooded Americans have always been willing to gamble their last peso on a dream."³ In hindsight, Adams's intuition about the American psyche proved far closer to the mark. Today, around the world, people know about the American Dream and can articulate its meaning. The term has become so well known that in most languages, people simply refer to it in the English vernacular.

For an American, it's peculiar to think that people of other cultures and lands have no counterpart to the American Dream. When I ask people from around the world what their dream is, they are taken aback. How strange it must be for them to know so much about our American Dream without having one of their own. That's beginning to change. My sense is that a European Dream is now beginning to take shape and form. It's still in its birthing stage, but its contours are already becoming clear. In many respects, the European Dream is the mirror opposite of the American Dream, making it easier to understand by holding it up to the American image and noting the many dissimilarities.

The American and European dreams are, at their core, about two diametrically opposed ideas of freedom and security. Americans hold a negative definition of what it means to be free and, thus, secure. For us, freedom has long been associated with autonomy. If one is autonomous, he or she is not dependent on others or vulnerable to circumstances outside of his or her control. To be autonomous, one needs to be propertied. The more wealth one amasses, the more independent one is in the world. One is free by becoming self-reliant and an island unto oneself. With wealth comes exclusivity, and with exclusivity comes security.

The new European Dream, however, is based on a different set of assumptions about what constitutes freedom and security. For Europeans, freedom is not found in autonomy but in embeddedness. To be free is to have access to a myriad of interdependent relationships with others. The more communities one has access to, the more options and choices one has for living a full and meaningful life. With relationships comes inclusivity, and with inclusivity comes security.

The American Dream puts an emphasis on economic growth, personal wealth, and independence. The new European Dream focuses more

on sustainable development, quality of life, and interdependence. The American Dream pays homage to the work ethic. The European Dream is more attuned to leisure and deep play. The American Dream is inseparable from the country's religious heritage and deep spiritual faith. The European Dream is secular to the core. The American Dream is assimilationist. We associate success with shedding our former cultural ties and becoming free agents in the great American melting pot. The European Dream, by contrast, is based on preserving one's cultural identity and living in a multicultural world. The American Dream is wedded to love of country and patriotism. The European Dream is more cosmopolitan and less territorial. Americans are more willing to employ military force in the world, if necessary, to protect what we perceive to be our vital self-interests. Europeans are more reluctant to use military force and, instead, favor diplomacy, economic assistance, and aid to avert conflict and prefer peace-keeping operations to maintain order. Americans tend to think locally, while European's loyalties are more divided and stretch from the local to the global. The American Dream is deeply personal and little concerned with the rest of humanity. The European Dream is more expansive and systemic in nature and, therefore, more bound to the welfare of the planet.

That isn't to say that Europe has suddenly become Shangri-la. For all of its talk about inclusivity, diversity, and preserving cultural identity, Europeans have become increasingly hostile toward newly arrived immigrants and asylum seekers. Ethnic strife and religious intolerance continue to flare up in various pockets across Europe. Anti-Semitism is on the rise again, as is discrimination against Muslims and other religious minorities. While European nations and the European public berate American military hegemony and what they regard as a trigger-happy foreign policy, they are more than willing, on occasion, to let the U.S. armed forces safeguard European security interests.

Meanwhile, the Brussels governing machinery, say European Union (EU) supporters and critics alike, is a labyrinthine maze of bureaucratic red tape that frustrates even the most optimistic Europhiles. EU government officials are often accused of being aloof and unresponsive to the needs of the European citizens they are supposed to serve. European Union staff have been caught up in financial scandal. Special interests—and especially the farm lobby—are accused of exerting undue influence over the allocation of EU funds. The small member states accuse Germany and France of bullying and bulldozing through protocols and

treaties favorable to their interests and, worse yet, of not obeying the existing EU directives when inconvenient, and thus creating a double standard within the Union. Most recently, both countries announced they would refuse to adhere to the EU requirement that their budget deficit be restricted to 3 percent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP). (The GDP is a measure of the value of total output of goods and services produced each year.) Germany and France accuse the smaller and poorer states of not being grateful for all the economic assistance they have extended to them over the years. Everyone accuses the United Kingdom of periodically sabotaging efforts to create a stronger union of European peoples. For their part, the Brits waffle back and forth, not sure whether their own best long-term interests rest with being part of a greater Europe or going it alone. On top of all this, economic reforms inside the Union have slowed of late, raising serious doubts about Europe's hope of becoming the world's most competitive economy by the end of the decade. The list of grievances, frustrations, slights, and mishaps is tediously long but probably no more so than one might expect of charges aimed at other government entities in the world today.

The point, however, is not whether the Europeans are living up to the dream they have for themselves. We Americans have never fully lived up to our own dream. Rather, what's important is that Europe has articulated a new vision for the future that's different in many of its most fundamental aspects from America's. It is this basic difference in how Europeans and Americans envision their future that is so important to understanding the dynamic that is unfolding between these two great superpowers of the twenty-first century.

But I'm getting slightly ahead of the story. We will delve into these two very different dreams throughout the remainder of the book, with an idea to understanding why the European Dream might be better positioned to accommodate the many forces that are leading us to a more connected and interdependent globalized society.

To appreciate the new European Dream, however, we need to better understand what made the American Dream so compelling for so many people, both here and around the world, for more than two centuries. That dream, so powerful and seductive that it captured the imagination and heart of much of humanity, is now losing its luster—aging if you will—as new global realities force a rethinking of the human vision in the coming era. What were once considered the prime virtues of the Ameri-

can Dream are increasingly viewed as drawbacks and even impediments to the fulfillment of human aspirations, a reality few would have imagined just a short while ago. The fall of the American Dream is, in many ways, inseparably linked to the rise of the new European Dream. That is because it is the very shortcomings of the older vision that are making the new vision appear so attractive.

Before we begin this exploration of changing dreams, a confession is in order. I have a deep attachment to the American Dream. It has been my spiritual and philosophical guide for all of my life. Whatever I have done with my life, I owe much of it to following the American Dream that my parents passed down to me when I was a child. But, I also have to admit that the misgivings I now have about how I've lived my own life are also deeply entwined with the myth of the American Dream, something that I hope will become more clear in the pages and passages that follow as we explore the end of one great human journey and the beginning of another.

If I were to be given the choice of living my life over, I would likely choose to be an American again. There is so much to admire about this country. Its beauty and its majesty are what come to the minds of newcomers when they first visit our shores. It has long been a beacon in a troubled world; a place where a human being could become what he or she chose to be.

What really separates America from all of the political experiments that preceded it is the unbounded hope and enthusiasm, the optimism that is so thick at times that it can bowl you over. This is a land dedicated to possibilities, a place where constant improvement is the only meaningful compass and progress is regarded to be as certain as the rising sun. We are a people who threw off the yoke of tyranny and vowed never to be ruled by arbitrary elites of any kind. We eschew hereditary transmission and class distinctions, embrace the democratic spirit, and believe that everyone should be judged solely on his or her merits.

Americans have long been aware of our special circumstance. We think of America as a refuge for every human being who has ever dreamed of a better life and been willing to risk his or her own to come here and start over. Cynicism, skepticism, and pessimism are completely alien to the American way and find little support among the American people. Can the same be said of Europe?

That's why it saddens me to say that America is no longer a great country. Yes, it's still the most powerful economy in the world, with a mil-

itary presence unmatched in all of history. But to be a great country, it is necessary to be a good country. It is true that people everywhere enjoy American cultural forms and consumer goods. Rap music, action movies, and other forms of entertainment, as well as our brand-name clothes, are eagerly snapped up around the world. America is even envied, but it is no longer admired as it once was. The American Dream, once so coveted, has increasingly become an object of derision. Our way of life no longer inspires but, rather, is looked on as outmoded and, worse yet, as something to fear, or abhor.

Even most Americans, if we took the time to really think about it, would have to say that we have somehow gotten off track, lost our way. We are not as sure about who we are and what we stand for, about what motivates and inspires us on both a personal and a collective basis. To some extent, it's the American Dream itself that has led us to our present sense of malaise. Its central tenets are less applicable in a globally connected world, something we will explore at great length throughout the book. Just as important is the fact that the American Dream has been truncated, with part of its essence being left by the wayside, leaving the core hollow. We'll come back to the second point shortly.

A Chosen People

The first thing to understand about the American Dream is that from the very beginning it was meant to be exclusive to America. It was never meant to be a dream shared with or exported to the rest of the world. Its power rested in its particularism, not in its universalism. One can only pursue the American Dream on American soil. The dream's uniqueness to the American context is what made it so attractive and America so successful. Its exclusivity is now what makes it increasingly suspect and inappropriate in a world that is beginning to forge a global consciousness.

When the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620, they truly believed that they had been delivered by God from the yoke of their European oppressors. The last of the Protestant reformers, these refugees saw themselves as the new Israelites and likened their perilous journey to that of the Jews of old who fled their Egyptian taskmasters and, after having wandered aimlessly in the desert for forty years, were delivered by Yahweh to Canaan, the promised land. Their spiritual leader, John Winthrop, told

his small flock just before disembarkation that they were "the chosen people," called upon by God, to be an example and light to the world. "For we must Consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us . . ." ⁴ If we fail in our service to the Lord, Winthrop warned, "We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are agoing." ⁵ If, on the other hand, they served their Lord by improving their lot, God would look over them and reward them.

While schoolchildren today learn about the great daring and sacrifices of these brave and humble servants of the Lord, they were not always so well received by their own contemporaries. Some, like Archbishop Richard Hooker, saw in their "puritan" ways a certain holier-than-thou attitude that made them less fit to walk among common men and more disposed to live "in some wilderness by themselves." ⁶

The Pilgrims, and other oppressed religious orders and sects that came after them, saw the great American wilderness as a fallen nature ready to be subdued and reclaimed for God's glory. They saw themselves, in turn, as God's emissaries, his stewards, who by dint of faith and perseverance would tame a wilderness and create a new Eden—a promised land that would flow with milk and honey.

The notion of a "chosen people" continued to resonate down through American history, becoming the leitmotif of the American Dream. Herman Melville's book *White-Jacket: or, the World in a Man-of-War* speaks to the exuberance and zeal Americans felt, being a chosen people, destined for greatness. He writes,

We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time, we bear the ark of the Liberties of the world. Seventy years ago, we escaped from thrall, and besides our first birth-right—embracing one continent of Earth—God has given to us, for a future inheritance, the broad domains of the political pagans, that shall yet come and lie down under the shade of our ark, without bloody hands being lifted. God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. ⁷

Many Americans continue to see themselves as a chosen people and America as the promised land. They believe that America is destined for

greatness and that the American way is God's way. Our very success seems proof positive that we were in fact chosen. God has indeed rewarded us for our faith and service with the most prosperous and powerful nation on Earth. Most Europeans find this aspect of the American Dream odd, even a little scary. The very notion that God has made of us a chosen people and our nation a promised land often elicits chuckles of disbelief, especially among a more secular European population who long ago left a personal God behind. But what our European friends seem to miss is that it is this very element of the American Dream that has been the driving engine behind the American sense of confidence—many Europeans might say arrogance—that each of us can "move mountains" as long as God is on our side.

Every school day, our children pledge their allegiance to "one nation under God." Our currency is inscribed with the motto "In God we trust." While we try to make sure to separate church and state, the private life of the vast majority of Americans is taken up with God. We are the most devoutly religious people of any advanced industrial nation in the world.

Americans' religious beliefs often spill over into the political arena. Nearly half of all Americans (48 percent), for example, believe that the United States has special protection from God. ⁸ Some prominent Evangelical Protestant leaders even suggested that the reason the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon were attacked and nearly three thousand people sent to their deaths was because God was displeased with America's errant ways and no longer afforded special protection to his chosen people.

A strong majority (58 percent) of the American public say that the strength of American society is "predicated on the religious faith of its people." ⁹ Nearly half of the American people say that it is necessary to believe in God to have good values. ¹⁰ Six in ten Americans say that their faith is involved in every aspect of their lives, ¹¹ and 40 percent say that they have had a profound religious experience that has changed the direction of their lives. ¹²

Americans live their faith each day. Thirty-six percent of the public pray several times a day, while an additional 22 percent pray once a day, 16 percent pray several times a week, and 8 percent pray once a week. ¹³ Sixty-one percent attend religious services at least once or twice a month, while nearly half (45 percent) attend services at least once a week. ¹⁴ Given America's deep religiosity, it's understandable that 71 percent of the public favor starting each school day with a prayer. ¹⁵

What's even more surprising to Europeans is how literal Americans view the scriptures. Sixty-eight percent of the public believe in the devil.¹⁶ Even among college graduates and those with post-graduate degrees, 68 percent and 55 percent, respectively, believe in the devil.¹⁷ More than one-third of all Americans are biblical literalists, who believe that every line of the Bible is the actual word of God and not simply inspired interpretation or made-up stories.¹⁸ (By the way, 93 percent of Americans own a Bible.)¹⁹

America's deep religious convictions have butted up against American secular education almost from the very beginning of the public-school movement. Nowhere has the struggle between the two been more fiercely waged than over the question of whether to teach evolution or creationism in the nation's schools. Forty-five percent of Americans believe that "God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so."²⁰ It's no wonder that 25 percent of Americans believe that creationism should be required teaching in the public schools, while another 56 percent say creationism should at least be offered in the curriculum.²¹

Even more disturbing to many nonbelievers in the United States and Europe is the fact that 40 percent of the American people believe that the world will end with an Armageddon battle between Jesus and the Antichrist. Forty-seven percent of those who believe in Armageddon also believe that the Antichrist is on Earth now, and 45 percent believe that Jesus will return in their lifetime. The majority of those who believe that Armageddon is coming point to natural disasters and epidemics, like AIDS, as signs of disruption and chaos prophesied in the Bible.²² If there is a silver lining to the Armageddon story, it is that 82 percent of Americans believe in Heaven, and 63 percent say they're likely to go there. Only 1 percent believe they're going to Hell.²³

I've heard it said by more than a few commentators that while Americans and Europeans squabble over big and small matters, they are still far more alike than different in their basic attitudes and outlooks. The religious statistics suggest otherwise. While six out of ten Americans say their religion is "very" important in their lives,²⁴ in European countries religion is barely a factor in people's day-to-day lives. Even in Catholic Italy and Poland, only a third of the public say that religion is very important to them.²⁵ In Germany, only 21 percent say that religion is very important to them, while the percentage in Great Britain drops to 16 per-

cent and in France to 14 percent, and in the Czech Republic, it's 11 percent.²⁶ In Sweden, the numbers are even lower, 10 percent, and in Denmark, 9 percent.²⁷ Nor is Europe alone. In Korea, only 25 percent of the population considers religion to be very important in their lives, and in Japan only 12 percent consider themselves very religious.²⁸ While half of all Americans attend church every week, by comparison, less than 10 percent of the population of the Netherlands, Great Britain, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark attend religious services even once a month.²⁹ Across Western Europe nearly half the population almost never goes to church, and in Eastern Europe the number is even lower.³⁰

Many Europeans no longer believe in God. While 82 percent of Americans say that God is very important to them, approximately half of all Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes say that God does not matter to them.³¹ When it comes to religious beliefs, American views are much closer to the views of people in developing countries and very much at odds with the rest of the industrialized world.

Does any of this really make much of a difference? Nothing is more fundamental to how people think and behave in the world than their personal values. In the case of the majority of Americans, religious values color how we act, not only at home but also abroad. For example, American attitudes on the nature of good and evil differ substantially from those of our European friends. The World Values Survey asked respondents in various countries to choose which of two different views of morality best reflected their own attitudes: "There are absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. These apply to everyone, whatever the circumstances"; or, "There can never be absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. What is good and evil depends entirely upon the circumstances of our time. . . ." ³² Most Europeans, and even Canadians and Japanese chose the second response, while Americans were more likely to favor the first response.³³

Because of our deep religious conviction that there are absolute and knowable guidelines about what constitutes good and evil and these guidelines never waver, regardless of the circumstances, we tend to see the world itself as a battleground where good and evil forces are continually at play. For that reason, our foreign policy has always been conducted, at least in part, as an unfolding moral saga pitting the forces of good against the forces of evil. Other countries might see our military intervention in more material terms, believing that for Americans, like others, self-interests

and utilitarian gain are the prime movers. That may be. But, at least as far as justifying war, it has always been sold to the American public as a struggle of good against evil. During the Cold War, our efforts to curtail Communist expansion were viewed as a moral crusade against "Godless Communism." In the waning years of the Cold War, President Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as the "evil empire." After the fall of Communism, we turned our moral compass on the threats posed by rogue regimes and terrorist groups. In the wake of the attacks of September 11, President George W. Bush rallied the American people by referring to our efforts to ferret out terrorists as a great crusade. Later, the president would refer to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the "axis of evil." Although Europeans cringe at America's use of religious language to define the global struggle, the White House rhetoric finds a willing audience in the American heartland.

The belief that we are a chosen people has made Americans the most patriotic people in the whole world. In a study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, the U.S. ranked first of twenty-three countries in its citizens' sense of national pride.³⁴ Seventy-two percent of Americans say they are very proud of their country.³⁵ No other industrial country in the world boasts that kind of pride. Less than half of the people in the Western democracies—including Great Britain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Denmark—"felt 'very proud' of their nationalities."³⁶ It's not surprising, given America's patriotic ardor, that American men and women are far more willing to fight for their country than citizens of thirty other nations, according to a poll conducted by the Gallup Organization.³⁷

Europeans view with alarm America's patriotic fervor and feeling of national pride, and especially America's sense of cultural superiority. Six out of ten Americans believe that "our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others."³⁸ By contrast, only 37 percent of the people in Great Britain and 40 percent of Germans feel that their culture is superior to others.³⁹ And here's the kicker: only one out of every three Frenchmen believe that their culture is superior to others.⁴⁰

What most concerns many Europeans is America's belief that everyone else should conform to the American way of life. According to the Pew Global Attitudes Projects, 79 percent of Americans believe that "it's good that American ideas and customs are spreading around the world," while less than 40 percent of Europeans endorse the spread of American ideas and customs.⁴¹

What's particularly interesting in all of these surveys about patriotism,

nationalism, and ideas about cultural superiority is that among Europeans and people of other regions around the world, national pride is declining with each successive generation. America is the exception. A whopping 98 percent of American youth report being proud of their nationality, compared with only 58 percent of British youth and 65 percent of German youth.⁴² Most Americans see these numbers as a positive sign of the vitality of the republic. Many Europeans wonder if America is lost in the past. In a globalizing era where allegiance to country is becoming less important in defining individual and collective identity, the fact that Americans remain so passionately committed to the conventional nation-state political model puts us squarely on the side of traditional geopolitics, but hardly in the vanguard of a new global consciousness.

As long as the majority of Americans find their solace in religious faith and continue to believe that we are a chosen people, looked over and protected by God's grace, there is little likelihood that our sense of nationalism and patriotism will wane. I don't mean to suggest that a sense of nationalism has disappeared from the world stage. But, what is clear is that for virtually all of the industrialized nations, and for many developing countries, the nation-state is no longer the only platform for expressing one's beliefs and convictions and for fulfilling one's aspirations. The European Dream, as we will see later on in the book, is the first transnational dream to emerge in a global era. If national pride is shrinking in Europe, it's not for the reason that Europeans are less enamored of their countries but, rather, because their identities and loyalties now reach below and beyond nation-state borders to encompass a richer and more deeply layered sense of embeddedness in the world.

It's going to be very difficult for Americans to adjust to a borderless world of relationships and flows where everyone is increasingly connected in webs and networks, and dependent on one another for one's individual and collective well-being. What happens to the American sense of being special, of being a chosen people, in a world where exclusivity is steadily giving way to inclusivity? Does God really care less about the whole of his earthly creation than he does about the North American part? Europeans might find such a conjecture funny, but, believe me, many Americans remain wedded to the notion of our special status as God's chosen ones. If we were to give up that belief, or even entertain doubt about its veracity, our sense of confidence in ourselves and the American Dream might experience irreparable harm. Frequently, American athletes and celebrities,

political leaders and businesspersons say, when interviewed on television, that whatever adversities they have overcome or accomplishments they've achieved or successes they've enjoyed they owe to their religious faith and God's grace. I have yet to hear a single European sports figure, celebrity, or political leader make a similar claim.

It should be pointed out that not every immigrant who came to America was inspired to do so because of religious convictions—most did not. While some found religion once they were here, many others never did but were still able to live out the American Dream. Even today, a very sizable minority of Americans are not very religious at all, but they still identify with the American Dream. That's because the notion of a chosen people has become so pervasive in American culture over the course of the past two centuries that it has shed some of its earlier religious roots and become ingrained in the American psyche.

Religious or not, most Americans believe that we enjoy a special status among nations and peoples. Why is this belief so important? Europeans don't feel they are a chosen people, and yet they seem able to make their way in the world. But here's the difference. Europeans often ask me how it is that Americans are always so upbeat about their future. In large part, it's the idea of being a chosen people that makes us Americans such eternal optimists. We have no doubt that we are destined for greatness, both individually and as a people. It makes us willing to take more risks than other people because we believe that we are being watched over and taken care of and fated to succeed.

The Withering of the American Work Ethic

Although the idea of being a chosen people has afforded Americans a sense of confidence in our ability to make something of our lives, there is another key element to the American Dream, without which it would never have become so powerful a vision. If John Winthrop represented the spiritual side of the American Dream, it was Benjamin Franklin who provided the practical guidance. Franklin's vision of America drew its inspiration from the European Enlightenment with its emphasis on materialism, utilitarianism, and individual self-interest in the marketplace. Franklin looked out over the pristine American wilderness and saw vast untapped resources that could be harnessed and made productive. He envisioned America as a

kind of grand laboratory for the exploration of science and technology. His idea of the American Dream was a nation of inventive genius, continually engaged in creating wealth and expanding the reach of the marketplace. Franklin favored the utilitarian to the sacred and aspired to create a material cornucopia rather than be delivered up to eternal salvation. His America would be made up of an industrious people grounded in the practical arts.

If Winthrop offered salvation, Franklin offered self-improvement. For every act of revelation, the pioneers were administered a dose of utilitarian rationality, making Americans, at one and the same time, the most fervently religious and aggressively pragmatic of any people on Earth—a status we retain to this very day. Franklin took seriously Thomas Jefferson's radical claim in the American Declaration of Independence that every human being has an inalienable right not only to life and liberty but also to the pursuit of happiness. No government before that had ever suggested that people might have a right to pursue their own happiness. How does one strive to be happy? Franklin believed that happiness was obtained by ceaseless personal improvement—that is, making something out of oneself.

The American Dream, then, brought together two great European traditions into a sort of grand alliance that, while contradictory on the surface, ignited a vision of human agency more powerful than anything that had previously existed in the annals of human history. While part of the American Dream was to remain focused on Heaven and eternal redemption, the other part of the dream was to remain focused on the forces of nature and the pull of the marketplace. This unique melding of religious fervor and down-home utilitarianism proved a powerful force on the American frontier and later in the building of a highly advanced industrial, urban, and suburban society.

The reason the American Dream has remained so durable is that it speaks to the two most basic human desires—for happiness in this world and for salvation in the next world. The former required perseverance, self-improvement, and self-reliance, and the latter unswerving faith in God. No previous dream offered the prospect of the best of both worlds—the here and now, and the world to come.

While America's religious commitment remains strong, there is growing evidence that the second component of the American Dream is beginning to weaken. In recent years, a younger generation of Americans seems

to have all but eliminated the part of the Declaration of Independence where Jefferson says that everyone has the right "to pursue" happiness, and has, instead, shortened the clause to read that everyone has the right to happiness. Franklin, recall, was forever admonishing the readers of his *Poor Richard's Almanack* to keep their noses to the grindstone. Franklin-esque aphorisms, all of which exhort the virtues of discipline and hard work, have all but been forgotten: "Idle hands are the Devil's workshop," "Never put off till tomorrow what can be done today," "A stitch in time saves nine." The American Dream was built on the idea that success comes from applying oneself, being resourceful, and becoming self-reliant. Franklin's proverbs were the last thin threads of what was once a single weave uniting a secular utilitarianism of the Enlightenment with the older Calvinist religious tradition, what Max Weber later referred to as "the Protestant work ethic." (We will discuss the Reformation theology in more detail in chapters 4 and 5.) Today, a growing number of younger Americans have broken with the work ethic. For them, the American Dream has less to do with faith and perseverance and more to do with luck and chutzpah.

One of the most intriguing public opinion polls I've come across, in all of the years of looking at such surveys, asked young people under the age of thirty whether they believe they will become rich. Fifty-five percent of all young people answered affirmatively, believing that they would become rich.⁴³ One might suspect that of young Americans. Don't forget, the Horatio Alger stories—that it's possible for every American to go from "rags to riches"—is what the American Dream is all about. But what was really fascinating about the survey was the follow-up question. When asked how they would acquire such riches, 71 percent of those who were employed believed that there was no chance that they would get rich by their current employment.⁴⁴ Well, what about future employment prospects? It turns out that an overwhelming 76 percent of young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine believe that, regardless of the job one has, Americans are not "as willing to work hard at their jobs to get ahead as they were in the past."⁴⁵ I assume they are including themselves among the lot.

When *Newsweek* conducted this survey, it asked whether it was likely the respondents would become rich, if not by their work, then by investments, inheritance, or good luck. As to investments, the poll was done in 1999, when the bull market was supercharged and investors were record-

ing record gains on their stocks. No longer. Inheritance is a possibility, but most of the baby-boom generation is awash in debt and not likely to be able to pass on a fortune—at least not enough to cover the 55 percent of young people who believe they are going to be rich.⁴⁶ That leaves us with luck. All of these categories—investment, inheritance, and luck—require little in the way of hard work and perseverance, the kind of qualities Franklin had in mind as the quintessential virtues for getting ahead in America. My own suspicion is that a lot of kids think they are just going to be lucky. It will somehow come to them without having to work hard for it.

I'm reminded of a book written by the late social critic Christopher Lasch—which he entitled *The Culture of Narcissism*. It was Lasch's contention that the consumer ethos had gained such a deep hold on the American psyche that most Americans, and especially the young, are drowning in momentary pleasures and trivial pursuits. He writes: "The pursuit of self-interest, formerly identified with the rational pursuit of gain and the accumulation of wealth, has become a search for pleasure and psychic survival. . . . To live for the moment is the prevailing passion—to live for yourself, not for your predecessor or posterity."⁴⁷

Shortly after Lasch's analysis, the late New York University educator Neil Postman published his own account of America's wayward narcissism in a book entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Both of these keen observers of American culture worried that younger Americans were increasingly caught up in a media culture that sold the idea of instant gratification of one's desires. The result was that each successive generation of Americans was less willing or even less able to work hard and postpone gratification for future rewards. The narcissist's temporal frame is immediate and self-centered. Past commitments and future obligations are considered unnecessary restraints and impediments to instant gratification. In this new culture of narcissism, everyone feels entitled, and far less willing to put off happiness until tomorrow. America's \$330 billion advertising industry is relentless in its pursuit of the idea that you and I can have everything that we desire now. Why wait? To ensure that end, America has sported a consumer credit-card culture that allows us to enjoy now and pay later. Many Americans are living well beyond their means and awash in consumer debt—all of which perpetuates the narcissistic behavior that Lasch and Postman noticed was sweeping fast into American life.

Has the American Dream descended from its once lofty peak where it combined Christian eschatology with Enlightenment utility and rational

behavior, and just become a dream of having good luck? Apparently, for a growing number of Americans, the answer is yes.

Getting Something for Nothing

Americans have always been risk-takers. That's part of what the American Dream is all about. We used to associate American risk-taking with the willingness to start over in a new land, tame a wilderness, invest in an idea, or start a new business. Today, for a growing number of Americans, risk-taking has been reduced to little more than gambling.

In 2002, seven out of ten Americans engaged in some form of legal gambling. Fifty-seven percent of Americans purchased a lottery ticket in the past year, and 31 percent of Americans gambled in casinos.⁴⁸ The annual growth rate of American gambling has been a steamy 9 percent in the past decade, which means that gambling has been growing significantly faster than the U.S. economy as a whole.⁴⁹ Americans are now spending more money on gambling than on movies, videos, DVDs, music, and books combined.⁵⁰ In 2002, Americans spent \$68 billion on legal gambling at racetracks, at casinos, and on lotteries, compared to \$27 billion in 1991.⁵¹ When I was a child, in the 1950s, only the state of Nevada allowed gambling. Today, forty-seven states have legalized gambling. The states raise more than \$20 billion from lotteries and casinos, or more than 4 percent of their total revenue.⁵²

Gambling has fast become the national pastime and, for many Americans, a near obsession. Powerball jackpots can exceed \$300 million. It's not unusual for people to wait in lines that are sometimes five hundred people deep, spending most of their day queued up to purchase a single ticket.⁵³

More than \$400 million a year is given over to advertising state lottoes and other games.⁵⁴ Much of the advertising is spent on exploiting the American Dream theme of rags to riches. The New York Lottery lures customers with the slogan "A Buck and a Dream." The Chicago Lottery exclaims, "This could be your ticket out."⁵⁵

Gambling, like drugs, has become a dangerous addiction for millions of Americans. Both cater to the need for instant gratification—happiness now. The National Research Council (NRC) estimates that upwards of 3 million Americans are "lifetime" pathological gamblers, an additional

1.8 million Americans are "past year" pathological gamblers, 7.8 million people are "lifetime" problem gamblers, and 4 million are "past year" problem gamblers.⁵⁶ More troubling is the rising number of adolescent gamblers who fall in the "past year" pathological or problem category—approximately 20 percent of American youth.⁵⁷

The desire for instant success has become pervasive across American culture. Legal gambling is only one of the many venues Americans increasingly pursue in hopes of realizing the American Dream. For a while, in the late 1990s, the stock market was all the rage. Millions of Americans gambled away their life savings in hopes of becoming instant millionaires. High-tech stocks became the new ticket to success. The smart investor became the new Horatio Alger protagonist—except, unlike the original American hero who had to work hard and overcome adversity to succeed, his modern sequels merely had to listen to tips on the street, pick would-be winners, and place a call to their brokers. In the end, the market came tumbling down, leaving millions of baby boomers and Gen Xers without adequate savings for their retirement years and having to face the prospect of working well into their seventies to make ends meet.

For many younger Americans, the new genre of TV reality shows has become the latest vehicle to hitch their star to. Thousands of young people line up to audition for shows like *All American Girl*, *American Idol*, *American Juniors*, *America's Next Top Model*, *Average Joe*, *The Apprentice*, *The Bachelor* and *Bachelorette*, *Big Brother*, *Meet My Folks*, *Mr. Personality*, *Next Action Star*, *Fame*, *The Family*, *Joe Millionaire*, *Star Chamber*, *Survivor*, *30 Seconds to Fame*, and *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* In 2004, there were more than 170 reality shows on American television.⁵⁸

All of the participants in these shows hope to be discovered, to become famous, to be a celebrity. While some of the shows require a certain amount of talent and expertise, most just require the participants to show up and be themselves. Andy Warhol's prescient prediction, more than thirty years ago, that in America everyone would have their fifteen minutes of fame, is now being played out nightly on American TV, as ordinary people put themselves in front of the cameras so that millions of other Americans can watch them live out their lives.

For the lucky few who make it on to these reality shows, fame is indeed short-lived. Most quickly shrink back into the anonymity of day-to-day life after their appearance on the shows. But, for millions of American viewers, seeing someone just like themselves on TV becoming famous,

even for an instant, keeps alive the idea that it could happen to them as well . . . all it takes is a little luck. In the meantime, millions of viewers can live out the American Dream vicariously by watching the fortunate few who beat the odds, convinced that the dream is still alive and that their turn is coming.

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. The new substitutes—legal gambling, celebrity television shows, and the like—are grounded in fantasy and delusion. 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.

This is a harsh judgment, but probably increasingly true for a number of young middle-class Americans who grew up coddled and spoiled by doting parents who showered them with every conceivable pleasure and experience money could buy, often before they were even old enough to appreciate it. Overindulged, these sons and daughters of baby-boomer parents are unlikely candidates for the kind of personal commitment required to keep the authentic American Dream alive. Faith, discipline, hard work, self-reliance, and self-sacrifice are hardly the terms one would normally use to describe today's American middle-class youngsters. Ennui is a more accurate description of the emotional and mental state of growing numbers of American young people. “Been there, done that” is a phrase one often hears from kids. By the time these youngsters have reached early adulthood, they have been everywhere, done everything, seen everything, and had everything. They have little or nothing to look forward to or to aspire to. Their dreams have been answered even before they had a chance to dream them. For these young Americans, the most difficult life task is motivation itself. It's no wonder that alcohol, drugs, and gambling are all on the rise. When the future is no longer something to work toward and fill in but is something already experienced and left behind, then only momentary pleasures are left to ward off the boredom and make it through another day.

Some observers of the American scene have argued that one of the reasons that the American Dream is losing currency is that we have over-empowered our kids, giving them an inflated sense of ego and, with it, a

belief that they are entitled to success because of their many special attributes. One educator once put it this way: “Today kids get an A just for showing up.” I was recently teaching a class of young business leaders, half of whom were from Europe, the other half from America. The Europeans said they were perplexed that whenever they attended a business meeting where a presentation was given by an American businessperson, the Americans in attendance would shower the speaker with congratulations for doing a brilliant job even if he or she was merely delivering a rather standard talk about not very interesting things. The Europeans complained that because Americans are constantly over-empowering one another, the bar for performance continues to be lowered and standards of excellence compromised. After all, if you are always being told that everything you do is insightful, well conceived and thought out, and effectively executed, then why try harder?

A sense of entitlement goes hand in hand with over-empowerment. If one is continually told how great he or she is, he or she eventually begins to believe it and comes to expect that all good things should come to him or her. For these young people, the American Dream is no longer thought of as a quest but is regarded more as a right.

The desire for instant gratification, when combined with a sense of over-empowerment and entitlement, can create a volatile emotional mix. The narcissistic personality type is generally less able to handle life's many frustrations, and more prone to antisocial behavior, even including using violence to get what they feel they deserve and are entitled to.

Is the once noble quest of the American Dream turning dark and foreboding at the hands of a new generation? A tracking poll of the views and values of Canadian and U.S. citizens over an eight-year period from 1992 to 2000 offers some insight into the matter. Canadians and Americans were asked to “agree or disagree” that when one is extremely tense or frustrated, a little violence can offer relief, and that “it's no big deal.” In 1992, 14 percent of Americans and Canadians agreed that a little violence is okay.⁵⁹ By 1996, the proportion of Canadians believing that a little violence was justified had fallen to 10 percent, while the proportion of Americans had leaped to 27 percent.⁶⁰ In 2000, the proportion of Canadians went back up slightly to 14 percent, but the Americans who thought a little violence was okay shot up to 31 percent, nearly one-third of the American public.⁶¹

Even more disquieting, Canadians and Americans were asked if “it is acceptable to use violence to get what you want.” In 1992, 9 percent of

Canadians and only 10 percent of Americans said using violence to get what you want was acceptable.⁶² By 1996, however, 18 percent of Americans felt that it was all right to use violence to get what you want, while still only 9 percent of Canadians thought the same way.⁶³ In 2000, the gap between Canadians and Americans had widened even more. Twelve percent of Canadians thought violence was justified to get what they wanted, while 24 percent of Americans felt the same way.⁶⁴ That's nearly one out of four Americans believing that using violence to get what they want is acceptable. Michael Adams, who heads up the polling organization Envisionomics, concluded that "Americans are prepared to put a lot more on the line than Canadians to achieve their version of the American Dream," including committing acts of violence, if necessary.⁶⁵

American Civic-Mindedness

Wait a minute! Can it really be that bad? True, Americans are more focused on becoming rich than any other people. And yes, we are probably more self-involved and overindulged than many other people in the world. But what about the other side of the American character, the civic side that the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville found so appealing about the young America when he visited the country in 1831? Tocqueville took notice of the American penchant to create voluntary associations to advance civic welfare, a phenomenon largely absent in Europe at the time. He wrote,

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. Americans combine to give fetes, found seminaries, build churches, distribute books and send missionaries to the antipodes. Hospitals, prisons, and schools take shape that way. Nothing, in my view, more deserves attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.⁶⁶

While Americans are far and away the most individualistic people in the world, we also give an enormous amount of our time to serving the com-

munities in which we dwell. Fraternal organizations, youth clubs, neighborhood and civic associations, arts and educational groups, sports and recreational activities, and numerous other efforts of a like kind have long been a staple of American life. We have always prided ourselves on being a nation of civic-minded volunteers. Could we be both self-centered and community-minded at the same time?

Although seemingly paradoxical, the American proclivity to civic-mindedness has come to reflect our deeply held notions about individual freedom. Americans have always had misgivings about ceding too much power to the state. For us, freedom has meant the ability to amass personal wealth and become independent. We have long viewed the government's role as a guarantor of individual property rights and have eschewed the notion that it ought to play an activist role in helping to provide for the general welfare or redistribute wealth to the less fortunate among us. (More on this in chapter 2.) So, from the very beginning, Americans preferred to keep taxes low and limit government involvement in the community in order to optimize individual accumulation of wealth and ensure greater personal control over the disposition of one's property. Helping the needy, in turn, became a matter of individual choice.

Lester Salamon, the director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, notes that America's unique civil society tradition grew out of our history of individualism. He points out that "a strongly individualistic cultural ethos . . . has produced deep-seated antagonism to concentrated power." The result is that Americans are "reluctant to rely too heavily on government to cope with social and economic problems, thus leaving such significant problems to be tackled through private voluntary effort."⁶⁷ That's why, for example, in America, unlike Europe, half of all U.S. colleges and hospitals, and two-thirds of the social service organizations, are in the not-for-profit sector rather than the public sector.⁶⁸

America's strong religious roots also account for the proliferation of civil society institutions. Many of the nation's nonprofit health, education, and social service institutions were created as extensions of religious institutions. For example, Americans opted, early on, to establish hospitals in the not-for-profit sector, rather than rely on government to provide health care for the citizenry. Today, 46 percent of the employment in the not-for-profit sector resides in the health-care arena.⁶⁹

Anxious to ensure against a single official state religion, as was the case throughout most of Europe, Americans made the decision to separate

church and state, allowing diverse religious sects to flourish. They did and, among other things, created their own colleges and universities to provide religious instruction along with a general education.

When we peel off all the many layers of the American not-for-profit sector, what becomes obvious is the looming presence of the religious community in the civil society as compared to European nations. American religious organizations make up 11 percent of the nonprofit employment and nearly one-third of all the volunteering, whereas in Western Europe, religious employment is only 3.5 percent of all nonprofit paid employment, and religious volunteering is only 11 percent of all volunteer work.⁷⁰

Granted, a substantial amount of volunteer activity in the religious community is geared toward social services like feeding the poor, providing shelter for the homeless, and making available health-care services to the needy. Still, the overwhelming number of volunteer hours are spent on pastoral and other activity related to the religious institutions' own perpetuation.

Many proponents of nonprofit engagement argue that civil society organizations are better equipped than government agencies to administer social services to those in need because they are in the communities they serve and are better informed and more motivated to serve their neighbors. All true. The problem is that the volunteer not-for-profit sector in the United States has not been able to provide anywhere near the same level of assistance to the needy and poor that government could were it to play a more activist role—as it does in Europe. And, even with all of the praise heaped on Americans' civic efforts to provide social services, the fact remains that, in the United States, paid employment in the not-for-profit social services sector still ranks below the average in a comparative study of twenty-two nations. While, on average, one out of four paid jobs in the nonprofit sector in the twenty-two nations studied are in social services, in the United States, only 13.5 percent of all paid nonprofit jobs are in social services.⁷¹

None of this is to suggest that America's civil society is not a formidable force. But much of the motivation behind American civic-mindedness can be traced back to the individualistic and religious roots of the American character. In most of Europe, by contrast, the civil society is far more secular in its orientation and less tied to the Christian notion of individual charity and more to the socialist idea of collective responsibility for the welfare of the community.

Moreover, many of America's not-for-profit organizations have traditionally served as social supports for the business sector. Adult organizations like Kiwanis Club and Ruritan and youth organizations like Junior Achievement and even 4-H are essentially adjuncts to the commercial arena, even though they are, strictly speaking, nonprofit volunteer organizations.

In recent years, a growing number of observers have begun to notice a steady and even precipitous decline in voluntary participation in the not-for-profit sector in America. Harvard's Robert Putnam published controversial findings on the decline of the civil society in his book *Bowling Alone*. He attributes the shrinking of American participation in volunteer activity to a number of factors. Putnam believes that approximately 10 percent of the decline in volunteering is attributable to the pressures of time and money, especially on two-career families. Another 10 percent of the decline, according to Putnam, is traceable to suburbanization and sprawl, and the accompanying increase in commuting time, which leaves less time available for involvement in after-work nonprofit activity. The third reason for the decline, however, says Putnam, is the increasing privatization of leisure-time entertainment, and especially the amount of time spent watching television. He estimates that upwards of 25 percent of the decline in civic participation can be connected to electronic entertainment of all kinds. Finally, Putnam argues that half the decline is simply a generational shift, with younger Americans far less interested in giving their time to others and advancing non-pecuniary social goals.⁷² If he is right, it suggests that the American character has hardened, and that time and money pressures and pursuit of personal pleasure has made us even less willing to look out for the social well-being of our neighbors.

If this is indeed the case—there are those who say that our civic-mindedness has not declined quite as much as Putnam and others imply—then the American Dream would seem to be cocooning even further into the promotion of narrow self-interest, with dire consequences for the well-being of society.

There is, however, another side of the story. It's not that all Americans are selfish, are lazy, want something for nothing, and are uncaring toward their fellow human beings. Those Americans exist. There are, nonetheless, millions of other Americans who have worked hard, made good on the American Dream, and shared their good fortune with the less fortunate through personal acts of charity and volunteer activity in the com-

munity. But there is also an increasing number of other Americans of good character who have simply given up on the American Dream. They believed. They kept their faith, worked hard, applied themselves, constantly improved their skills, saved and sacrificed for a better future for their children, served their communities, and still came up short. They followed the script, only to find disappointment at the end of the story. While a slim majority of 51 percent of American voters still believe it is possible to live the American Dream, what's shocking is that a third of all Americans (34 percent) no longer think it is possible.⁷³ For many of them, the price of a lotto ticket has become their only chance of living out the American Dream.

Unfortunately, while the ranks of the overindulged and the undervalued have swollen in recent years, the number of Americans who can still lay legitimate claim to living out the American Dream have dwindled in comparison. The result is that the American Dream has suffered immeasurably, losing much of the power it once enjoyed as the defining story that unites the American people.

2

The New Land of Opportunity

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your buddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.¹*

THOSE WORDS were written by a young nineteenth-century American poet, Emma Lazarus, and are inscribed on the plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty for every émigré to see.

For millions of disheartened Europeans—and later, refugees from other lands—America was the place where they could leave behind their desperate pasts and begin life anew. Here was the great land of opportunity. For most of America's first two hundred or so years, the myth and the reality of American opportunity were close enough to go unquestioned. Life was tough for each new immigrant. There were few social supports to help one along in this new world. On the other hand, for those who were determined to succeed, diligent to the task, and disciplined in the American work ethic, chances were fair to good that they could make a better life, if not for themselves, at least for their children.

Moving on Up

Up until the 1960s, upward mobility was at the core of the American Dream. Then, the dream began to unravel, slowly at first, but picking up

NOTES

CHAPTER 1: THE SLOW DEATH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

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