

The American Dream: Defining the Dream

Good evening, and thank you all for coming. Before we get started, I'd like to thank especially our hosting institution, the American University for its willingness to let me speak here tonight. I'd also like to thank my faculty advisor, literature department professor Cynthia Bair Van Dam for her hard work and exceptional patience well above and beyond the call of duty in preparing and editing this week's lecture. *Pause for applause.* Thank you again. I'd like to thank my classmates for their encouragement, and a few of you for your direct help in coming up with a few of the themes or questions asked here. Finally, I'd like to thank all of you for showing up to listen to me talk about this nation, and something we hold special: the American Dream.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Michael Wagner, and it is my distinct pleasure to speak with you all this evening, and for the next several days about the American Dream. Some of you may know this, for those of you that don't, this series of speeches serves as my senior honors capstone, designed to literally "cap off" my time at the American University, and to share some research and thoughts on a topic that everyone knows about, and yet almost no one studies formally.

So let's start at the beginning: what is the American Dream? If only it were that simple! The answer to that question is, as you might imagine, a lot more complicated than a simple sentence, and we have a great deal to talk about before we can come close to answering that question.

I would like to answer at least a few questions, though, so let's start at the real beginning. The first question I'd like to answer is: Why? Why write a senior thesis about the American Dream and deliver it to you all this evening? The answer is simple: to get my capstone done. Right—again, if only it were that simple! Let me ask you all a quick question: who here has heard of the American Dream, or has an idea about what the American Dream is, or knows something about the American Dream? Just raise your hand.

Audience raises hands.

Right—all of you. Obviously, it's not as if the American Dream is dead in this day and age—and obviously you just proved that fact to me. For further proof, simply turn on the television and listen to the Presidential candidates talk about how they will restore or reaffirm the American Dream. For example, let me read a few quotes from this current campaign:

*"[I]n these challenging times, I am committed to using all the resources of this government and great nation to create opportunity and make sure that every deserving American has a good job and can achieve their American dream."*¹

- Senator John McCain

*"I know what it's like to have to scratch and work and claw to build a better life for your family. And I don't want to wake up many years from now and find that the American dream is still out of reach for too many Americans."*²

- Senator Barack Obama

*"How can you tell a family about to lose their home that there's nothing we can do to help them? How can you tell them that if they had failed spectacularly we would've helped them but because they are failing quietly, desperately, we are turning our backs? How can you tell them that there is nothing we can do to rebuild the American Dream?"*³

- Senator Hillary Clinton

It seems pretty clear to me that unlike, say, the free silver movement, for example, or Soviet foreign relations policy, the American Dream isn't an out of date political or societal ideology. Regardless of the specifics of these candidates' proposals, each one of them has invoked the American Dream frequently during this campaign. And, of course, every candidate, every politician has for decades talked about the importance of living out the American Dream, so this is nothing new.

So if the American Dream is talked about a lot in our political discourse, and obviously is something you all have heard of and think about, what's the problem? The problem for me is that, although the American Dream clearly seems to be in good shape, I believe it can be in better shape. There are a couple of trends in today's society that tell me the American Dream isn't what it could be or used to be.

First, let us look a little more closely at the sentiment expressed by these Presidential candidates I just quoted. They are, of course, politicians appeals to voters, emphasizing their commitment to America and to a better life for everybody. But why the talk about "restoring" the American Dream? Is the American Dream a car that needs tuning up? Well, apparently yes—in case you missed the memo, America today is at a "crossroads." We are, in fact, in the middle of one of the most consequential Presidential campaigns in a generation. Our economy, if experts are correct, is about to enter a recession. Our troops are deployed in battle overseas, and the terrorist threat continues unabated. The value of the dollar has fallen sharply, and we continue to import oil from unstable regimes. Most importantly, the vast majority of Americans no longer believe this nation is headed in the right direction.⁴ And when times are tough like this, well, people can get . . . skeptical about abstract promises and pie-in-the-sky ideals like the American Dream.

I freely acknowledge that this nation isn't in the best shape, but like all Americans, I am at heart an optimist. I will always believe that America's best days are ahead of us, not behind us. And so, part of this address is to express my belief that the American Dream is not something that can be swept aside or discredited by poor economic conditions or opinion polls. Rather, I believe the American Dream is something that forms the heart and soul of what it means to be an American, something that will always be there through good times and bad. The roots of the American Dream go much deeper than a stable economy, and touch the very core of our historical experiences and struggles as a nation, as we shall expand upon later.

The second trend I've noticed is perhaps a bit more narrow in scope, but a troubling observation nonetheless—a sort of "America-last" ideology, if you will. In essence, this line of thought claims that American culture and American values are bankrupt and unjust, and inferior to virtually anywhere else in the world. Some of the consequences of this claim include the notion that somehow America is at the root of most of the world's troubles, and that anything resembling traditional American values is not a good thing and should be avoided.

Let me explain with a quick example. For example, a couple of years ago, I went to see the movie *Superman Returns*. Now, I'm a Superman fan, and although I don't really read the comics anymore, I always enjoyed the *Superman* movies. So what was the problem with *Superman Returns*? It was a line delivered by *Daily Planet* editor Perry White when discussing Superman's unexpected return: "Ask him if he still stands for truth, justice, all that stuff."⁵ The third and final line, "the American Way," was conspicuously missing. Whether this was a reflection of the film makers' feelings about the state of America, or a producer's decision to make the film more palatable

to foreign audiences I cannot say, but clearly, I was rankled by the omission. In many ways, Superman *is* the epitome of the American Dream. An immigrant from another world, a man who grew up in the American heartland, uses his talents and abilities to help the needy, and stands for, yes, truth, justice, and the American way. And if this is Superman's character, why omit "The American Way?"

It's just a movie, I know, but is symptomatic of this "America-last" ideology, a sharp attack on our culture and values as a nation. Now, I have no problem discussing our culture, our values, and our foreign policy—certainly, any responsible citizen should. However, it's difficult for me to engage in a reasonable discussion when the other side insists that American culture is so bankrupt compared to Europe or some liberal ideal that there is nothing good about this nation or our accomplishments. In the end, I believe the American Dream is at the heart of our culture and our values, and this "America-last" critique strikes at the heart of the American Dream.

Again, this is a more perfect union, not an actually perfect union, and our society, polices, and ways of life can certainly be criticized. However, I simply don't believe these notions and implicit charges that the American Dream is merely a facade for an unjust, bankrupt culture and system of values. Another reason to deliver this speech is to help rebut this criticism. Partly, I will attempt to demonstrate, this criticism is not directly relevant to the American Dream and what the American Dream actually means and is. Ultimately, I firmly believe in the American Dream, and both its strong historical roots in what makes America great, and its importance for today's society and for our future as a free nation—not just in our nation, as I will argue, but our future in the world.

Finally, I'm speaking with you today because, as I mentioned earlier, there has been almost no serious historical or scholarly exploration of the American Dream. That's not to say this is a capstone devoid of research. Many major themes of the American Dream, immigration, economics, sociology, and U.S. history certainly receive an enormous amount of popular and academic attention. However, when starting research for this project I found just one book about the American Dream, this book here, entitled, of course, the *American Dream*, written by New York professor Jim Cullen. *Hold Up Book*. Further research revealed just a handful of other texts or essays exploring the American Dream across various historical eras.

The consequence of this is that I was able to find no overarching historical or academic consensus on what the American Dream even is, let alone what its role in American society is or how it is related to America's past, present, or future. I'd like to try and fill in some of those gaps from my admittedly limited and humble position.

While doing my research, I came across two major misconceptions about what the American Dream is, and what it means in the context of this country's history. The first misconception was one I fell prey to when starting to write this capstone: the mistaken notion that the American Dream has been around ever since 1776, and with just a few minor tweaks, is pretty much in the same form today. Unfortunately for my research and this project, that is definitely not the case. A belief in America as a unique land, and a dream for a better life certainly has been around since Jamestown's founding in the 1600s, but the hopes and dreams of Americans have changed quite a bit since our Founding Fathers. In fact, I can say right now there have been *several* iterations of an American Dream over the years, and I hope to try and explain some of these historical changes in the next few days.

The second misconception is that the American Dream is *solely* a product of late-twentieth-century social engineering. This is the mistaken notion that the American Dream is merely a manufactured ideal, something popular culture conjured up out of nowhere to justify our mass

prosperity after World War II. The consequences of this notion include the belief that the American Dream is simply a product of its time, and not really applicable to the decades before or the decades after, or worse, that the American Dream is a post-war myth that never really existed at all. This negative perception of the American Dream is intertwined with the “America-last” criticisms I spoke about above, intertwining a mythical American Dream with a culture that glorifies consumerism and conformity. Of course, again, I don’t believe in this interpretation of the American Dream for a moment, and hope to show that the American Dream is in fact found in generations before, with common themes that every generation of Americans have held close to their hearts.

So in the next few days, instead of, as I originally intended, simply exploring the various facets of the American Dream with some scholarly and historical depth, I hope to also make a case for the richness of the American Dream. These facets of the dream, these pillars, if you will, that constitute the modern American Dream I argue were not arbitrarily pullet together into some socially constructed myth called the “American Dream,” but in fact come from an integral part of our society and history. And in the event you haven’t picked up on this, I will be proceeding from the assumption that the American Dream is a good and necessary concept in American society.

I do have a few caveats. First, I am *not* going to use the American Dream as a crude bludgeon to attack or defend any particular public policy. This is a popular tactic, of course: *look at the current state of our tax system!* they will cry. Either our taxes are too tilted in favor of the wealthy, endangering the American Dream for the “rest of us,” or our tax code is too complicated, making it too hard for the “average Joe” to achieve the American Dream. This is, I believe, a fundamentally shallow and narrow approach to the American Dream. As a concept, a story, a vision, the American Dream is much more grand, much more ennobling, and much more important than any single piece of public policy.

This is not to say I will not be discussing public policy at all. Some of the most incisive criticisms of the American system, and by implication, the American Dream, are related to our system of government and economy. Depending on how you stand, these public policy critiques are either valid on their face, valid with reservations, or not valid at all. From my perspective, I will argue that although the American Dream does in fact rest on certain assumptions about the type of society we have, it is not enough just to critique the system to critique the American Dream. I will respond to these attacks, but will also argue that our free market capitalist system in many ways enables the existence of the American Dream. This is not about rampant consumerism, or the dominance of money, but the victory of liberty, the ability of Americans to choose their own future and decide the course of their own lives in a way never before possible in history. Feel free to debate me after my speech—I’d be more than happy to do so—but I am letting you know up front I will not be calling for communism or anything like that to help us achieve, or even understand, the American Dream.

Drink of water.

Now that I’ve laid out the background and plotted a general course for this discussion about the American Dream, let me next lay out the cognitive framework for our discussion; that is, the way I’m thinking about the American Dream, and the way I’ll be talking about it. I’ll be discussing the American Dream using three big frameworks: the first, through the power and necessity of good definitions; the second, the power and necessity for stories in understanding human interaction; the third, more directly, an analogy, comparing the structure of the American Dream to that of a house, with a foundation, pillars, and a roof. Although a bit cheesy, if Lincoln can use a “house divided” to discuss slavery, I think I’m in good stead to talk about the American Dream in the same way.

First, definitions. A long time ago, in my ninth grade geometry class, we talked about cookies. More specifically, our teacher asked us, “What is a cookie?” This seemingly straightforward question yielded nearly a half an hour of interesting discussion, with the class trying to come up with a good definition of a cookie. Just when we thought we had a good answer, a definition that would work for, say, a chocolate chip cookie, he would ask, “Well, what about this . . . ?” and mention another type of cookie that didn’t work with our definition—windmill cookies, perhaps, or Oreos. The lesson was about the importance of defining basic geometric concepts, like the line, the plane, and the sphere, but today, you and I can use this same lesson to begin our explanation of the American Dream.

So let’s just ask the question: what is the dictionary definition of the American Dream? As you might have guessed, this is an easy question with a complicated answer—one capstone’s worth, you might say. For a long time, I defined the American Dream very simply: the idea that, in this country, if you work hard, you can make something of yourself and have a shot at achieving your dreams, no matter who you are.

Once again, I wish it was that simple. Unlike a geometric definition of a line, definitions of popular societal concepts are rarely so precise. To start our definition of the American Dream, let us journey back and examine the writings of a man named James Truslow Adams. One of the few historical consensuses I found was that the notion of the American Dream as a popular concept was crystallized by Adams’ writing.

Two years after the stock market crash of 1929, Adams, a respected and popular historian, sat down to write a history of the United States. Even ninety years ago, this was a lot of history to cover, made all the more daunting because Adams chose to start his book not in 1776, but in 1607, the year English settlers reached the New World.⁶

Adams was something like the David McCullough of his day, the author of history books popular with both academics and the American public. Interestingly enough, like McCullough, Adams would also write a critically successful biography of John Adams in 1930.⁷ Immediately after this book’s publication, Adams would begin work on his next project, a single-volume history of the United States. Just five months later, Adams submitted *The Epic of America* to his editors for publishing. As explained by one of his contemporaries, his intent was not to write a simple history book:

“The plan of a single-volume *history* of the American people made no appeal to him; the plan of a single-volume *interpretation* of that history attracted him strongly.”⁸

Adams wrote not a direct, fact-based recitation of facts and statistics, but a broader “interpretation” of American history through the eyes of a man fundamentally optimistic about the future of the American republic. His work was well received, even for a country in the throes of the Great Depression.

In his concluding chapter, Adams wrote this:

“If, as I have said, the things already listed were all we had had to contribute, America would have made no distinctive and unique gift to mankind. But there has been also the *American Dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.”⁹

In short, Adams identified what he believed set the United States apart from every other country on earth, and wrote it in form. He identified what he aptly described as the American Dream.

As a short aside, from a very basic level, I can already say that Adams' identification of an American Dream in 1931 easily dismantles the basic charge that the American Dream is *exclusively* a post World War II conception. Clearly it's existed for longer than that. Of course, the American Dream Adams articulated is certainly not precisely the same as what you or I might think of as the American Dream. Adams wrote this in 1931, and obviously times have changed: the rise of the nuclear age, computers, shifts in international relations, the creation of James Bond . . . so if the concept of the American Dream is bigger than my definition, and has evolved since Adams' definition, what shall we use? What is the definition of the American Dream today?

As I mentioned, when I first dreamed up this project, I believed this would be the easiest part to do. After all, I thought, all I had to do was look up a few Presidential speeches, a few historical essays, a few popular media sources, and pull out the definition. If only . . . right. This turned out to be the toughest part of this project. To wit: ask any person on the street if he or she knows what the American Dream is, and ten out of ten—like you all—will almost certainly say yes. Ask those same people to *define* the American Dream, however, and you will almost certainly get ten different answers. Among the definitions I've heard:

"The American Dream is the ideal that everyone has the opportunity to achieve their dreams, if you work hard."

"The American Dream is probable possibility of personal success."¹⁰

"The American Dream is like Rocky, that rags-to-riches story."

"The American Dream is a reflection of our culture, the consumerism, reaching for things, focused on success, and the opportunity for success."

"The American Dream can be best summed up in Martin Luther King, Jr. 's, I have a Dream speech, about equality and opportunity for all."¹¹

"The American Dream is a myth; how can we have a dream that doesn't apply to everyone?"

"The American Dream is to become rich and famous so we never have to work again."¹²

"The American Dream? You trip on a sidewalk and sue the city."

The American Dream is, of course, more than a simple concept. It is part of our national lexicon, and as an expression of American values, is right up there with the Declaration of Independence. And yet, as we see, ideas and words can have more than one meaning. It quickly became apparent to me that even for men and women who genuinely believe in an American Dream, there is no single definition. There are a lot of different ideas floating around about what the American Dream is, some in agreement, and some completely at odds with each other. Now, isn't this a bad thing?

I submit to you that it is not, and is in fact one of the American Dream's greatest strengths. I will expand on this argument later, but let me say this for now: for a nation such as ours, built on ideas, and not territory; on principles, and not monarchs, we Americans have a special challenge finding unifying ideals and beliefs. E Pluribus Unum is tough when the many is more than three-hundred million people of different races, creeds, and religions. The American Dream is one of the few unifying concepts we have, and the fact the American Dream can be somewhat flexible, meaning somewhat different things for different people, allows it to act paradoxically, and yet logically, as a unifying concept.

However, a flexible American Dream is different than a totally incoherent American Dream. Any successful unifying concept must, by definition, also have unifying principles to exist. Ask the same ten people on the street to identify some core elements of the American Dream, are you likely to find a few basic themes in their answers. As varied as it can be, the American Dream does have many basic themes, many intertwined with significant themes in American history or culture. For the next few speeches, I hope to explore what I have termed the major “pillars” of the American Dream, why they are significant, and how America’s history and culture have shaped each pillar.

To start, let me briefly outline each pillar in this conceptual “house” of the American Dream. The foundation of this conceptional American Dream house is on what all the pillars rest: the *pursuit of happiness*. Although, as I will explain tomorrow, it was never intended as such, Thomas Jefferson’s phrase “the pursuit of happiness” in the Declaration of Independence has become the foundational line of the American Dream, succinctly and eloquently outlining this nation’s promise of a better life. I found some mention or version of the American Dream in almost every single formulation. This is no coincidence, obviously, and in a way, every iteration of the American Dream is about our hopes and our dreams as Americans and as humans. This may be obvious, but it is important to consciously understand just how much of the American Dream is founded on pursuing happiness before we explore the rest of the Dream.

As for the pillars that rest on this foundation:

Upward mobility—the idea that in America, you can achieve your dreams and get ahead of the game. This pillar, or some manifestation of it, is probably the central pillar of the American Dream, built directly from the foundation of the pursuit of happiness. Be it a dream of rags-to-riches, a dream of equality, or even just building your dream home for your two-point-five kids, the dream that you can better your life is at the center of the American Dream. Upward mobility is not a catchall, however, and as we shall see, has a very specific meaning in the context of the American Dream, and when cast against the next pillar, equality, forms the biggest set of contradictions within the American Dream.

Equality—the idea that the American Dream applies to everyone. Equality is a powerful word. It is also a vague word, and a contentious word. What does equality mean? Equal opportunities? Equality of condition? Equality of rights? The answers are unclear, but equality is unquestionably a powerful idea, derived by many from Mr. Jefferson’s assertion that “all men are created equal.” Again, as we shall see, this was never the intent of the Declaration. The now-central role equality plays in the American Dream is, I will argue, probably the most recent and controversial addition.

Generational mobility—this pillar answers the question, “are you building a better future for your children?” Generational mobility I believe is another more recent addition, probably the most legitimate contender for a post World War II conception. Moreover, it is broader than *individual* upward mobility.. Unlike a better future for *my* children, this pillar goes beyond assuring that the next generation of Wagner men and women will have the same opportunities as I. It is the idea that as a class, the Wagners and everyone like me will be better off a generation from now. In other words, this pillar tries to guarantee that our children’s generation as a whole will be better off than our own?

Work ethic—the idea that in order to achieve the American Dream, you must first put some hard work into it. This pillar is drawn significantly from the idea of a “Protestant work ethic,” and is influential in my life. Because of how ingrained this notion is in American society since the Puritans, I was surprised to learn that earlier manifestations of the American Dream did not necessarily mention a work ethic. Rather, it may have been folded into the Dream during the Gilded

Age by men like Andrew Carnegie and J.P. Morgan.

Immigration—the idea that America serves as a beacon of hope and opportunity for the world. Immigration, and the concept of the immigrant nation, is another major component of the American Dream. For many, the story of an immigrant joining American society and making something of himself is *the* prototypical American Dream. I wrote this speech with this vision in mind, but am not making it the central point of this thesis. Rather, I wanted to write about the American Dream that all Americans—current and future—can embrace.

These pillars are essentially the basics of the American Dream I was able to identify most often. Of course, as I've said, the American Dream has many iterations. I am confident that countless Americans in countless years have added or subtracted details from their own American Dream. I've picked out a few more “supporting” pillars, so to speak, that appeared very often in stories about the American Dream. However, I think each of these “supplemental” pillars also have a key distinction: they are all variations, and in many ways, built off of the original pillars mentioned above. For example, home ownership is part and parcel of the pursuit of happiness, obviously, and is emblematic of generational and individual mobility if you become a homeowner. Some other, similar concepts I will try and touch on include:

The dream of the coast—this pillar is the only one I borrowed wholesale from another author, in this case from Jim Cullen, author of the book I mentioned earlier on the American Dream. Although I believe and will argue this is in many ways a derivative of the core pillars, the allure of the “coast,” of getting it rich quick, of reinventing one's self wholesale, is a powerful enticement, and like many things, intimately intertwined with the idea of the pursuit of happiness.

An ownership society—as referenced in the campaign quotes I mentioned earlier, this is a fairly straightforward notion of home ownership. Again, although integral to the dreams of millions of Americans, I will argue that home ownership *in and of itself* is not a sole requirement of the American Dream. Now I am, of course, a strong believer in home ownership. However, I also believe it flows out of a dream of social mobility and the pursuit of happiness, instead of being so integral to the American Dream that removing it would destroy the American Dream.

Rags-to-riches—the Horatio Algers stories, Rocky Balboa, the *Godfather*. These and similar stories are deeply linked to notions of the American Dream. Much like a work ethic, I tend to think that this part of the dream has been folded into the American Dream in the middle of the 19th century, but still clearly informs how we think about the American Dream. This supplemental pillar I will address in a larger section in a later speech entitled “Stories of the American Dream,” and talk about rags-to-riches, the self-made man, and the common man, all at the same time.

Finally, let us add a ceiling to our conceptional American Dream house: the idea of *American exceptionalism*. Although I am an American exceptionalist, I would not initially have included this as part of the American Dream. However, when researching the Dream, it quickly became evident to me that exceptionalism is so important, it is found in the very title: it's the *American* Dream. Not the French Dream, not the Russian Dream, not the Dream of the Free World, but the American Dream. By its very label, we believe the Dream, like so many other things, is uniquely American in origin, purpose, and destiny. In this sense, it is the concept that caps off the Dream.

As you can see, we have a lot to cover in the next few days. Where do all these parts and iterations of the American Dream, not to mention critiques of the Dream and its purpose and destiny in America's future, leave James Truslow Adams' upbeat, optimistic definition of the American Dream? Arguably, Adams was writing about the *American* Dream—that is, the dream of America as a country and as an ideal. Today it strikes me that the American Dream is more individualistic,

the dream of an average American. Still, Adams seems as apt a starting point as any other for an exploration of the American Dream. After all, he originally wanted his publishers to title *The Epic of America*—you guessed it—*The American Dream*. His publisher declined, believing that no one would “pay three dollars for a dream.”¹³ While this market analysis may have been correct, today people pay far more than three dollars for their own, ultimately priceless dreams.

Adams may have been the first to publish an articulated, written notion of the American Dream, but he was certainly not the last. Adams, however, was never really the *first* to define the American Dream, either. As we will discover tomorrow, the themes that form the pillars and foundation of the American Dream reach much further back than 1931, some as far back as the settling of the American continent itself. These themes are there deep in America’s past, where we shall explore a bit of America’s present.

The American Dream: An Historical Foundation

Good evening, and welcome back to the American University. I'm glad that most of you chose to return tonight, although I am told there is free pizza at tonight's event as well, so that may have something to do with it. Yesterday, we started exploring the American Dream through the first framework of definitions. Having explored many possible definitions of the American Dream, I would now like to move onto the second way of thinking about the American Dream, through stories.

I need not go into the importance and history of storytelling to humanity. The printing press is only a few hundred years old, and the written word itself extends back only a few thousand years. For millennia, stories were the only way to communicate mankind's experiences from generation to generation. The Bible, for example, is for most of its length the story of the Israelites and Christ. Today, of course, stories have lost none of their importance. Anyone go see a movie recently? That's—obviously—a story. Moreover, what is one of the most common buzzwords in today's Presidential campaign? The campaign “narrative.” Each of us as humans has a story, and, as we shall soon see, each nation also has a story.

Now, the problem with using a “story-based” approach to any serious topic is the misconception that stories are never true. After all, most people's introduction to stories comes through a bedtime story: Cinderella, the Three Little Pigs, or for me, the Little Engine that Could. And, of course, all of these stories are pure fiction—meant to inspire or convey a message, absolutely, but clearly not factual. This view is so pervasive we automatically assume something called a story is untrue—after all, we take care to label something a “true story.” And to be sure, many of America's stories likewise have false incarnations. A great man and the father of our country he was, but George Washington probably never chopped down that Cherry Tree.

The stories I am about to relate, however, are as far as I can tell, all true. As much as he was writing a serious historical work about verifiable historical events, James Truslow Adams was ultimately writing a story about America. Within those stories are embedded the stuff that makes the American Dream, the stuff that makes America, and the stuff that makes us Americans.

With that framework in mind, I would like to begin our two day exploration of this “house” of the American Dream, and at the same time tonight, relate some stories from American history. The purpose of tonight's lecture is more story based for a reason. As I mentioned, one of the misconceptions about the American Dream is the notion that it is somehow separate from American history, and I hope these initial stories demonstrate where we can find a lot of the thematic roots of the American Dream. I also hope to take on two of the biggest misinterpretations of the American Dream, and demonstrate how the actual circumstances of history surrounding some important events conflict with today's popular interpretations of the American Dream.

Pause.

In international relations, one hears talk about “national myths.” Related to both nation-building and storytelling, a national myth is simply a story about a nation's founding. Much more so than any other country, the United States finds its heart and soul in our national myth. From the Continental Congress, Washington crossing the Delaware, or John Hancock's signature on the Declaration of Independence, these stories from our national myth are the stories we all learn as schoolchildren.

However, if we, as James Truslow Adams did, move back another few hundred years, we begin to realize that there are actually two distinct national myths for America. This second myth

includes the *Mayflower*, the pilgrims, the first Thanksgiving, and the founding of Jamestown. These stories are just as familiar to our collective history, and just as important to our understanding of the basis of the American Dream. The first men and women in the new world helped create many of the values and traditions we know today.

Let's take a closer look at the details of the first men and women to arrive on the American continent. As I said, part of the reason for retelling these historical stories is to help point out where history and popular conceptions of the American Dream either match, or come in conflict, and America's founding is probably the first place to start. The first thing I'd like to do is dispel the notion that America was founded by immigrants. Although a romantic and inspiring sentiment, it is not true in a literal sense. By definition, immigrants arrive in a pre-existing society, hoping to contribute, assimilate, and prosper, just as millions of Americans certainly have done. However, the men and women who sailed across America had no such society to join, and were not in fact seeking to join a society either. They hoped to settle their own. To quote Samuel Huntington, an academic whose work I will be discussing in depth in a few days, "Before immigrants could come to America, settlers had to found America."¹⁴

The second thing to note in this founding myth are the reasons the Europeans settled in America. The first permanent settlement in the new world was not driven by religion, but by commercial opportunities—Jamestown, founded under a charter by, of course, King James I. The Virginia Company hoped to reap the benefits of trade with England in gold, wine, and other precious goods, and on May 6, 1607, about 100 English settlers landed in the Chesapeake Bay, sailed upriver about forty miles, and started building America's first permanent settlement.¹⁵ The story of their survival is as exciting a story as any in the history of North America, but one we shall save for another day.

Far north of Virginia, at Plymouth Rock, an entirely different group of people braved the Atlantic voyage to reach the new world. The men and women we know as the Pilgrims form the other half of this founding myth. The story of the *Mayflower* is a celebrated one in American history; I remember watching an animated video about the Pilgrims back in middle school, including a cute little mouse that made the voyage over as well. I don't know if they still show this film in schools, but the point remains: from the time we are young, we are taught to admire and remember the voyage of the *Mayflower*—and frankly, I am not about to tell you anything different. For any of you who have moved, for those here at college, think about the anxiety and change that was—and then think about a group of men and women who believed so strongly in their right to worship freely, they were willing to not only leave their homes and old lives forever, but to sail to an unsettled land. As much as the Jamestown settlers were brave, we can think of them as prototypical businessmen, opening a new "branch," so to speak, of the English trade, while still maintaining English forms of society. The Puritans chose to leave society altogether, and create their own.

In fact, the Puritans had in many ways already left English society. The Pilgrims did not actually come directly from England, but from the Netherlands. A separatist group who rejected the authority of the Church of England, they left England for Calvinist Holland in 1607. After ten years, however, the congregation worried about its future in a foreign land, and asked King James to, if he would not grant them tolerance, at least grant them a charter to leave for the new world.¹⁶ The King consented, and in 1620, 101 men and women boarded the *Mayflower* and set sail for the new world. Once again, their story of survival—the harsh winter, the first Thanksgiving, is inspiring, something I would encourage all of you to read.

However, it was not Plymouth Rock, but the Massachusetts Bay settlement that would

present the real foundation of the legacies of American exceptionalism and a nation deliberately designed as a haven for freedom. Founded just a few years later, this group of Puritans called themselves “non-separating Congregationalists,” who both believed they could reconcile their differences with the Church of England, and, more importantly, sought to form self-governing churches—admittedly with the intent of excluding those members who did not meet the definition of the faithful.¹⁷

Under the leadership of Reverend John Winthrop, the Puritans turned to King Charles I who granted them a charter for the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629. Winthrop hoped the colony, originally conceived of as a business venture, could be a refuge for Puritans and a “wilderness Zion”—his words, not mine.¹⁸ Thanks to him, we now have one of the best expressions of American exceptionalism in our national lexicon: the notion of a city upon a hill. One of Ronald Reagan’s more memorable lines, Reagan knew the importance of powerful language and in fact borrowed this phrase, slightly reworked, from John Winthrop. Before setting sail, Winthrop stood on the decks of his ships and delivered a sermon entitled “A Model of Christian Charity.”¹⁹ Designed primarily to inspire his congregation before sailing across an ocean, Winthrop’s sermon also gives our generation a glimpse at his vision for a better society.

“For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man . . . For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.”

- John Winthrop²⁰

What are we to make of this? The words of a religious zealot intent on creating his own kingdom, or a visionary leader who foresaw a new society that would model the best of his intentions to the world? A little of both perhaps: history records that, although obviously the Massachusetts Bay colony thrived, Winthrop was also something of an autocratic leader. Nevertheless, his colony both survived and thrived, and we cannot understate the importance of either Jamestown, Plymouth Rock, or Massachusetts Bay to the very existence of the United States.

I’ve said many times that America and our history is not perfect, and I likewise cannot unapologetically defend *everything* these settlers did. Obviously, the treatment of the native Americans for most of this country’s history was unquestionably wrong, and I cannot condone or accept that. Neither can I wholly embrace the track record of these religiously founded communities; a few years after settling the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Roger Williams and Thomas Hooker left to form Rhode Island and Connecticut, citing Winthrop’s own religious intolerance.²¹ But even flawed men and flawed visions have some value in them, and I believe the true legacy of these initial settlers on this continent was not just the English language or the common law system, but was the birth of a radical idea: that this nation could be conceived in liberty, and that this nation could be a place where your dreams come true.

What about Jamestown, though? There is an interesting conflict I found here: a nation settled both for religious freedom, and for great commercial opportunities. In many ways, this seems to be the great conflict of the American Dream: is the dream about economic opportunity and wealth, or about liberty and opportunity of spirit? The founding of America resembles these two interpretations of the American Dream so closely it is impossible not to wonder whether today’s incarnation of the American Dream is simply the latest in a centuries-old search for a better life.

A better life . . . it sounds wonderful—and wonderfully vague. And yet, it is clear to me that every single iteration, every single “pillar” of the American Dream I’ve examined has at its core this

idea of a better life, for ourselves, and our posterity. A better life, of course, is not a dream restricted to Americans, and in reality it seems to be so obviously a part of the American Dream that it hardly seems worth mentioning. However, I want to take this story and underline a key point: America is a self-made nation, and a self-made ideal. China, for example, draws its name from the 1st century emperor Qin who was, through force, able to unite the seven separate warring tribes into a single nation. Our country was not founded on the strength of the sword, or on such a national myth as forcing together groups by war, but on men and women who sacrificed everything to make their own society, to bring their own ideals and purposes for this better life.

Another, more familiar way to think of this ideal is to call it what it is: the pursuit of happiness. And, as I've already said, the pursuit of happiness is what I consider to be the foundation of the American Dream. In our metaphor of a house, the pursuit of happiness is the foundation on which we build every pillar, every framework of the American Dream. This better life—or at least the opportunity for a better life—this pursuit of happiness, the opportunity to succeed—I believe is at the very heart and soul of the American Dream, the anchor, to mix metaphors, which tethers all other parts together.

This phrase, the pursuit of happiness, of course, comes from the Declaration of Independence, a document rightly conceived of as one of our nation's most sacred documents. This document, alongside perhaps the Gettysburg Address or Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a Dream" speech, more than any other thing sums up what it means to be an American. There is another notion, however, that is well intended, but I believe to be mistaken. This is the view that the Declaration of Independence was intended to be what Jim Cullen calls a "Dream Charter" for the American Dream. "These words speak to us," he explained. He then recites the words of various social movements in American history, and notes "Each of these statements . . . or, to put it another way, each of these American Dreams—rested on the language, prestige, and confidence of the Declaration of Independence."²²

Countless authors and thinkers intimately link the Declaration with the pursuit of equality and the pursuit of material goods, and this is absolutely how we conceive of the Declaration today. However, as I examined many contemporary interpretations or explanations of the American Dream, it became absolutely clear that the preamble of the Declaration has been taken to mean far more than what the Founders intended. And, as a strict constructionalist, let me continue to explain. I argue the Declaration was never intended to lay out the blueprint for a classless society that celebrated diversity or laid equality among all citizens and social groups—or for that matter, even simply to announce the pursuit of happiness as a goal of a future American nation. Rather, the Declaration was written as literally just that: a *declaration* of the American colonies announcing their intent to become *independent* from British sovereignty. Indeed, the Declaration itself notes it was written to "submit these facts to a candid world"—a document not just for American eyes, but to demonstrate to the entire world the reasons and justness of the American cause.²³

Because the Declaration of Independence is so central to our heritage and identity as Americans, so popularly intertwined with the American Dream, particularly this idea of equality, and the source of our expression for the foundation of the American Dream, the pursuit of happiness, I am going to spend a few more minutes telling the story of how Jefferson came to write the Declaration, examining the language and purpose of the Declaration more closely, and explaining how I believe we can understand the significance of the Declaration when signed in 1776.

Like any other great document, the Declaration of Independence has predecessors, in this case, in both American and British history. The idea of calling this document a Declaration itself,

for example, is rooted in the British tradition of naming documents of great importance declarations—such as William and Mary’s Declaration of Rights, from which the underlying philosophical thinking about the rights of man comes.²⁴ Jefferson and his co-authors, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and, briefly, Benjamin Franklin, well-educated men of social standing them all, were doubtless aware of previous efforts at declaring independence, and took careful notes when crafting their final work.²⁵ Dozens of earlier declarations exist, most written in the months before 1776, often by state or local governments in a direct precursor to the national effort.²⁶ Thus, Jefferson had a rich wellspring of existing literature to work with—the English tradition, the various local documents, and his own background in classical education and literature.

By examining these documents, we can observe the progression of thought from what I just described—a literal declaration of political separation—to the version on which Jefferson eventually authored, and understand the basic intent of the Declaration of Independence. For example, Rhode Island’s declaration of independence, passed May 4, 1776, announced that in response to the King’s unjust actions:

*“[W]e are obliged, by necessity, and it becomes our highest duty, to use every means, with which God and nature have furnished us, in support of our invaluable rights and privileges; to oppose that power which is exerted only for our destruction.”*²⁷

Notably, the Rhode Island authors did not include language declaring all men created equal. Instead, the authors invoked the said “invaluable rights and privileges” that all men had—which, implicitly, did make all men equal in that sense—and the inherent right to resist a central authority that threatened these invaluable rights.

This implicit equality of rights was made explicit shortly thereafter, in the Virginia Declaration of Rights, written by George Mason. This document was one of two Jefferson drew on the most heavily.²⁸ Mason’s draft noted that “all men are born equally free and independent, and have certain inherent natural rights.”²⁹ Here again, Mason uses equality in a slightly different way than you or I might think of it. Equality in this sense means not an equality of absolute economic or class equality, but an equality of natural rights that all men shared at birth.

Which brings us to Jefferson’s draft, which more eloquently expressed what the many previous drafts were trying to make. Men were born free and equal at birth, and all had certain rights—which Jefferson listed as among them, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Again, Jefferson was in many senses distilling the point Mason was trying to make, who included “the means of acquiring and possessing property,” a far more unwieldy sentiment.³⁰ The equality Jefferson wrote about, then, was not equality in society, or the creation of a classless, totally egalitarian society, but an expression that by virtue of being human, you have certain rights and freedom that everyone *equally* shares.

Now, Jefferson did an excellent job eloquently and succinctly enumerating the basic rights of people in the Declaration. However, Jefferson made an important change from what previous authors had written. Jefferson, Mason, and other political writers drew from John Locke’s writings and philosophy. Locke, an English political theorist, had several years earlier authored *Two Treatises on Government*, explaining how life, liberty, and property were the three core rights any person possessed, and that government only legitimately existed to protect these rights.³¹ Much of the Constitution would later be structured around this line of thought. So, why did Jefferson instead write about the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the *pursuit of happiness*?

Truthfully, no one really knows for sure. Jefferson left no notes explaining his change in language. The majority of scholars believe his replacement of property was simply for penmanship,

to make the language flow, and give the Declaration a loftier tone than simply reiterating John Locke's language.³² No evidence really exists to justify the notion that this was a deliberate change on Jefferson's part to form this foundation of the American Dream. While pursuit of a better life, as we've discussed, is distinctly American in this context, the evidence does not bear out Jefferson giving this paragraph a wider thought than independence from Britain.

However, Jefferson could plausibly have changed the language to give the American cause a more solid foundation for rebellion. Replacing property with the pursuit of happiness does make an important shift in the way one thinks about the rights compared to how Locke conceived of them. Locke's writings envisioned a government designed to protect life, liberty, and property—all very tangible and easily understandable rights. The pursuit of happiness is of course much more vague, and much broader in scope. After all, the British government was not infringing on property rights in an absolute sense, certainly not compared to a communist-style system. But you can be absolutely sure that the Founders believed the British were infringing on their right to pursue their own happiness—a right to dream, if you will, and pursue a better future, just like the Plymouth Rock settlers, just like the Massachusetts Bay colonists. So by adding the pursuit of happiness, Jefferson enabled the Americans to plausibly claim that through imperial rule, taxation, and heavy-handed management, the British were in effect denying America the right to fulfill her destiny.

Regardless of the language Jefferson chose, it is very clear that the first sentence was in fact part of a paragraph-long argument. Men have rights. And to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men. Here Jefferson lays out the reason for government's existence. In this instance, Jefferson drew on the ideals, if not the language, of John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, which outlined this *raison d'être* for government.³³ And, as the Rhode Island draft noted, when government ceased to protect these rights, this permitted the people to do something extraordinary: alter or abolish it. Here we see the end point of this argument—that since Great Britain now failed to protect the rights held by all men, not just by kings or dukes, the American colonies now had the inherent right to rebel.

Here is the point I would like to make. Jefferson, it seems clear to me, did not write, nor the Continental Congress approve of, the preamble as a draft for a utopian new nation, or a color-blind classless society. Instead, the preamble effectively invokes one and only one right: the right of revolution. And, if we continue to read the document, the Declaration is a much more timely document than I think most of us remember. The majority of the Declaration is a list of grievances against the King, including charges of passing laws without colonial representation, privileging the British rulers from colonial laws, and a whole host of other problems. They are the reasons the Americans believed justified a rebellion, and they wanted to share these reasons first with the colonists, to set down on parchment enduring reasons for their struggles, and then the world.

Now, this is not to say that the Declaration reflected the totality of American sentiment. Our Founding Fathers *were* doing something special, and they knew it. John Adams hoped that America would be seen as an example for the rest of the world, especially in the realm of establishing a republican form of government. Jefferson's first drafts included language about the abomination of the slave trade, and we of course all know that the Constitutional convention struggled over the question of whether slavery was permissible in a nation declaring its freedom. But for the purposes of understanding the Declaration, it is clear that it was originally written as narrowly as it says—a declaration of American independence from Great Britain.

The Declaration was, of course, well received to a nation already in the middle of a war; when hearing the news, Washington's troops cheered and celebrated for the rest of the day,

eventually finding a statue of King George III to hack down and melt into bullets.³⁴ However, by the end of the war, and the years following it, the Declaration was not celebrated as a document, but only by the news—of independence—it carried. Historical writings in the two decades following 1776 described the Declaration as a political document, to be sure, or an act of independence, but with none of the reverence, or even the level of importance, we give the Declaration today.³⁵ If this is true, how then did the Declaration of Independence achieve such a monumental status in American history? Partly, it's because Jefferson and Adams lived long enough past the revolutionary generation to essentially write their own history, and emphasize the importance of the Declaration—in Jefferson's case, perhaps, to emphasize his own role when he became President in 1800 in the first political party transfer of power.³⁶ Whatever the reason, as the revolutionary generation passed away, Americans rediscovered this document to elevate it into the highest echelon of important documents by the 1820s.

The modern invocation of the Declaration of Independence, our lofty thoughts about the American Dream, about equality, about opportunity, actually comes from another American icon, Abraham Lincoln. Even creations need renewal—Jefferson spoke lovingly of the blood of patriots refreshing the tree of liberty. It would take the blood of over half a million patriots to renew the American promise during the Civil War. In the midst of this destruction, Abraham Lincoln would reinterpret the Declaration of Independence, forever linking it with ideas of the American Dream.

More importantly, Lincoln renewed the promise of America contained within our founding documents. Perhaps then more than any other time in America's storied history, our nation needed a common bond. Lincoln reached back not to the Constitution, in which was interwoven the stain of slavery, but to the Declaration of Independence. Drawing on Jefferson's language, Lincoln reinvented the *raison d'être* for the Declaration, and turned it into a sentiment underpinning the cause of the north, and the cause of the Union. It is thanks to him that the Declaration holds such a high place in American society—and consequently many of the ideals in the American Dream we derive from the Declaration.

Rather than examine the Gettysburg address immediately, I'd like to retell the story of an earlier episode from Lincoln's, well, storied life: the Lincoln-Douglas debates. In many respects the pinnacle of political debates, few remember that at the time, Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, the incumbent Illinois Senator, were not actually competing for votes directly, but for influence in the state legislator which would choose Illinois' next senator, or, for that matter, than all the debates were about one topic: expansion of slavery into the territories. To compete for the senatorial nomination, Lincoln and Sen. Douglas agreed to a series of seven debates across Illinois counties about this topic of slavery.

During the midst of this debate, as fine an oratorical display as this nation has ever seen, the Declaration of Independence came up as Douglas charged Lincoln with pushing for full equality between blacks and whites. Although less than a decade before the end of slavery, racism was still a serious factor in elections, and accusing Lincoln of supporting full what he termed "negro" equality hurt. Douglas argued that the Declaration of Independence was never intended to apply to blacks, because quite simply, Jefferson, a slaveholder, wrote the document and Jefferson knew what the implications were of writing about all men being created equal.

Lincoln's reply was equally succinct: Jefferson did know, and Jefferson did mean for the Declaration of Independence to include slaves—the fact he was a slaveowner notwithstanding. After all, Jefferson included the slave trade as a list of evils in his first draft, and Jefferson later spoke of trembling for his country when he thought of God as just, regarding slavery.

Here we see two of the brightest political minds of the time arguing about the meaning of the phrase, “all men are created equal”—and, arguably, in the narrow confines of declaring independence, neither man is entirely correct in his interpretation. It illustrates just how much of a sea change there had been in the United States, transforming the document into a roadmap for a better world.

Lincoln’s ultimate legacy in the field of political speeches was his own magnum opus—the Gettysburg Address. Here, four-score and seven years after the writing of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln took the basic language within and remolded it into a powerful speech emphasizing the promise of America, the promise that was contained within the writings of the Founders, but not enshrined in something so formal or magnificent.

Conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Lincoln, although not formally educated, was as shrewd an orator and politician as any man in Illinois or Washington, undoubtedly knew the exact details behind the Declaration of Independence’s writing and original purpose. Why did Lincoln choose to reference the Declaration constantly then?

The nation was on the brink of war, and through the course of human events, the Declaration of Independence now occupied a sacred place in the American political shrine. By referring to such a sacred document, Lincoln could sway more people, especially compared to the Constitution, which was at the heart of the difficulties the nation faced regarding slavery and everything else.

So there you have it: the foundation of the pursuit of happiness, and a more nuanced look at the Declaration of Independence and the language therein.

- Finally, there is an actual definition of the American Dream given around the 1776. In short, this dream was the *American* Dream—the dream not of individual Americans, but the dream of America herself. This dream can be found in the preamble: more perfect union, justice, domestic tranquility, blessings of liberty. It was a Dream of what the United States could be as a new constitutional republic, as a new nation, as an example to the world.
- Again, like the shining city on a hill, the founders believed the example of America would hold true across the ages. This has, of course, changed, as the American Dream is now a much more individual pursuit.

Thank you all for bearing with me tonight as I told you some stories I hope you already knew, and provided you with an interpretation I hope you found thought-provoking. I also hope you can join me for the rest of this series to discuss in depth the core components of the American Dream tomorrow night.

The American Dream: Pillars and Roofs

Good evening. For those of you joining us for our third speech in this series, my name is Michael Wagner, and it is my pleasure to join you all here in Washington, D.C. to talk about something I hope every American holds dear to our hearts: the American Dream.

In the past two days, I established why America doesn't have a single definition of the American Dream, and why this is good. I also examined the "foundation" of the American Dream—the Pursuit of Happiness—and told several stories from American history focused on the ideal of a better life and the pursuit of happiness, and explaining a bit more about the importance and misunderstandings about the Declaration of Independence. Today, I'd like to get into the meat of the presentation, if I may shift metaphors for this sentence. What are the core components and themes that form the American Dream? Are they intertwined? Are some of the pillars in this conceptual house dependent on other pillars? For that matter, are some pillars exclusive of other pillars? Just what do they mean for America today?

One of my on-and-off hobbies, apart from *Star Trek* and James Bond, is studying Presidential campaigns, histories, and speeches. Of course, none of this has anything to do with my own political ambitions. Nevertheless, ever since our Founders decided to vest the role of chief of state and chief executive into a single, elected office, unlike the Monarchy in England, Americans have been fascinated by the men—so far—we have chosen to lead this nation every four years. One of the more recent bits of political trivia is Ronald Reagan's closing remarks in his debate with Jimmy Carter in 1980. After years of double-digit inflation, energy crises, and the Iran hostage situation, Reagan asked America, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" It was a devastating question, and of course, the people said no and voted Reagan into two terms in the White House.

I tell this old campaign story because it illustrates what in many ways is the most common iteration of the American Dream: **upward mobility and the opportunity for upward mobility**. Are you better off than you were four, eight, sixteen years ago? A lifetime ago? Can you say the future will be better than the past? Of course, I should emphasize, that the Declaration of Independence notes we have the right to the pursuit of happiness—not happiness itself, so perhaps I should retile this section the opportunity for upward mobility. Any definition that looks, smells, and walks like the American Dream has some component enabling Americans to move up the ladder:

From Samuel Colton, a Whig author in the 1830s:

"Ours is a country, where men start from an humble origin, and from small beginnings rise gradually in the world, as the reward of merit and industry, and where they can attain to the most elevated positions, or acquire a large amount of wealth, according to the pursuits they elect for themselves."³⁷

- Insert quote from Hearn, American Dream in the Great Depression.

Just why is material gain, at least in this narrow sense, so important? To answer this question, and frankly, a lot of other questions about our national culture and history, I am going to turn to the observations of Alexis De Tocqueville, a Frenchman who toured the United States in 1831. A criminologist, de Tocqueville had intended to spend his time studying America's criminal justice and corrections system. Instead, he wrote what is now considered one of the classic works

in American political science: *Democracy in America*. His work expertly analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the new American Republic, and upon closer inspection today, still is amazing for how well it understands and explains this country we call America.

- Reference the fact that as a society without classes and an aristocracy, wealth is not always a guarantee of success. And because of this, Americans are naturally insecure about their wealth. You have to get Bill Gates, George Bush level rich to really feel secure—even if you’ve got a quarter-million dollar income, there’s no absolute guarantee the stock market won’t crash, your wife won’t leave you, that sort of thing. Only in an aristocracy do you have that sort of security.
- We traded that economic security for a few for economic opportunity for all. And it paid off, by allowing ourselves to be free in the economic sphere, we have the world’s greatest economy, and the failure of communism demonstrates this. In other words, to bring it home, we allow the pursuit of (economic) happiness, via liberty, and this pays off.

Americans are not always so individually oriented. While Reagan asked if we were better off than we were four years ago, a lot of other people asked, “Will our children be better off than then we are in forty years?” This is the conception of what I will term “**generational mobility**”—the dream that our children, and our children’s generation, will inherit a better country than ours. Now, granted, I have no children, so this was initially a more abstract concept to me. Generational mobility as a concept goes beyond simply assuring that the next generation of Wagner men and women will have more opportunities and a better life than I.

Now, this, as far as I can tell, is a conception which is in fact a genuinely post World War II pillar. Almost none of my historical research has revealed an emphasis on this generational mobility as a major, or even minor component of the American Dream. The focus has been, as I mentioned above, overwhelmingly focused on personal and individual achievement. So why shift the concern for the next generation?

Frankly, I’m not sure. This is as far as I can tell a notion which is, in fact, a genuinely post World War II “pillar.” Almost none of my historical research has revealed an emphasis on this generational mobility as a component of the American Dream. The focus has historically been, as I mentioned in my discussion of the Gilded age, overwhelmingly focused on personal and individual achievement. So, why this shift to a concern for the next generation?

- I’d like to think it is simple concern about the kids’ future.
- Moreover, this is not entirely new. For ourselves and our posterity.

Equality

- Equality is another one of those words that has a nebulous definition, part of the American lexicon. So, what does equality mean?
- A few basic types of equality. There is individual equality of opportunity. We may not all be rich, but we all have the opportunity to be rich. We may not all be President, but we all

have the chance to be President. Examples: extension of the voting rights via amendments.

In short, this is a very simplistic way to think about equality, alongside the version of equality presented in the Declaration of Independence—that is, equality of opportunity. There is no real barrier to preventing the immigrant or the President’s son from accomplishing exactly the same thing. This version of equality, a sort of loose equality of opportunity, I think, was at the basis of the American Dream for the most part. It is an implicit equality.

- Another quote about the American Dream: Coltrane, McCutchan, recap Adams, etc.

As you can see, each iteration of the American Dream has the word “every one,” or “all men,” or some derivation thereof. After all, the American Dream cannot be true if it only applies to a very specialized type of person—aka a monarchy.

- Equality of condition. We are all similarly or equally rich. We are all, if not President, equal in our influence of the President (anti-lobbyist mentality). Example: income disparity. Why is my neighbor getting ahead of me?
- For the most part, the individual dream of equality of condition is largely grounded in something else Tocqueville wrote. In America, because the equality of opportunity is well grounded, we begin to expect equality of condition. And, because equality of condition is very tangible—you can see easily if the Jones’ out pace you, it is something we want a lot—to the point where we must be careful it does not overtake liberty as a value, because liberty is a lot less tangible and a lot more abstract.
- Finally, there is equality of groups: equality of opportunity and to some extent, condition, for various social groups. Obvious example is Civil Rights movement, to bring blacks political opportunity, in terms of removing actual barriers to full participation in society; and now, conditional, using things like affirmative action to correct difference in equality. “Interest group” equality.

Where are all these notions of equality from? No surprise here: the founding document is often described as the Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Indeed, much academic literature focuses on the Declaration of Independence as the precursor for the widespread equality movements—the civil rights movement, women’s rights, all those “rights” movements in the 19th and 20th century. For example, one paper examining the “ideology” of the American Dream and how it has been presented in American education philosophy writes:

“It took several major ruptures in the very fabric of American society in the later half of the 20th Century to awaken a large segment of the American people to realize the unfilled promise of the radical American dream found in the Declaration of Independence.”³⁸

Again, we find the notion that the Declaration of Independence was the founding document of the American Dream, and in this article’s notation, several different American Dream’s: conservative,

progressive, and radical.

This is powerful stuff, words that literally changed the course of history. And, as we know now, not totally relevant to the modern ideals of societal and group equality. The Declaration of Independence was just that, a literal declaration of the American colonies of their political independence from Great Britain—to dissolve the political bonds which connected them. Now, a declaration requires a reason, and Thomas Jefferson drew upon the political thought of John Locke to justify America's separation from the mother country. Men, Locke wrote—and women, implicitly, I would argue—are endowed by natural law with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty, and property.³⁹ Liberty is required to preserve your life, and property is as well, forming a three-point set of rights which naturally reinforce each other. The next line of the Declaration demonstrates the reason for Jefferson's invocation: government exists to secure these rights, and Great Britain was not—thus providing a solid, natural law reason for the American colonies to separate. Nothing indicates that Jefferson was laying the groundwork for a colorblind society.

Today, however, equality is not simply equality of opportunity. Equality today means that minority groups have the same proportional access, wealth, and power as the majority. This class-based equality differs substantially, and first really came into national consciousness with the issue of slavery, and then the Civil Rights movement. In other words, the very definition of equality has for many changed for this part of the American Dream. It is linked with the idea of generational mobility, but generational for a group, not a whole nation—the idea that the next generation of African-Americans alone either vis a vis the majority or proportionally will be more prosperous. Difference is it is only one group's generation.

At this point, I'd like to bring up another extremely powerful exploration of the American Dream and American society, in Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, famous "I have a Dream" speech. King developed his own version of the American Dream. *Recap the speech.*

In a sense, I think this is the latest addition to the American Dream—certainly no less noble than the earlier incarnations, and almost required in an era that embraces the notion of a multicultural society. We want the American Dream to apply to each multiple culture, of course!

This is good. We like King's rhetoric, and as Samuel Huntington, the great miracle of America is the fact we were able to almost expunge race as a bone-deep issue in our national discourse and make this very diverse nation. Relate anecdote about watching memorial day parade with all sorts of nationalities.

This shift to class based equality is not entirely good, however, as I will argue more deeply later.

Immigration

If one is to discuss the academic, historical, or otherwise social implications or history of immigration, one almost has to start by invoking the Statue of Liberty and Emma Goldstein's poem engraved at the base. "Give me our tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free." Of course, one need not—the Statue of Liberty was built and erected in 1886, well after some of the first waves of Irish and European immigrants to America in the 1830s and 1840s. Likewise, if one is discussing popular interpretations of the American Dream, one likewise almost has to include a strong section on immigration. Again, one need not, for the American Dream is principally American, and not always just about immigrants. For many, though, the story of an immigrant yearning for the opportunities in America, joining our society, and making something of himself is

the prototypical American Dream.

When discussing immigration, I think there two dominant mythologies that we need to “deconstruct,” so to speak, to understand properly immigration’s role in American society.

First is the role of immigration in America’s history. One of the most popular phrases I’ve heard is the idea that “America is a nation of immigrants.” This is partly true—to be sure, no other nation on earth has such an attraction for immigrants, and has such a rich and varied history of immigration. However, the simple fact is, America is a nation of settlers. Take a look at America’s history, and you see brave men and women who braved the seas to land on a New World, so to speak, to create a new nation, conceived in liberty, if you will. If you recall from our earlier discourse on the Puritans and the Jamestown settlers, they were not emigrating to a new country, but intentionally choosing to forge their own destiny.

- Brief recap of the Puritan/Settling section, and conclude that America may be a nation of immigrants, but America was not founded by immigrants. America was founded by settlers, and all the immigrants in ages past have been joining that society, and to some extent, that society’s ideals.

Second is the motivation of immigrants. Emma Lazarus’ poem is wonderful, but historically, not always true. The streets are paved with gold, yes, but economics as much as a loftier burden of freedom drove the American Dream for immigrants, especially during the immigration waves of the late 1800s. Especially taking a look at the role of the immigrant in American society, the streets certainly were not always gold for the taking—life was damn tough!⁴⁰

- Recap Alan Kraut’s book on immigration. Recap the migratory patterns in the late 1800s not just from everywhere to the U.S., but all around the world, and explain his thesis on migratory patterns and economic opportunities perhaps being more responsible for migration into the United States.

The conclusion to professor Kraut’s insightful analysis of the global forces at work involved in emigration and immigration and patterns of human movement is to conclude that, first, a number of different “pushings and pullings” act on people, rather than a straight line from their hometown to Ellis Island. The second is that, under different historical conditions, and different social conditions, America was never guaranteed to be the repository of the world’s immigrants. However, it did happen this way, and I have yet to see another country, even today, offer the combination of hope, freedom, and opportunity like America does.

And yet, why is immigration such a dominant image in our conceptions of the American Dream? For the simple reason that, these mythologies aside, immigration does play a unique and central role to this nation. Take a single look at the lines that form outside our embassies and consulates in foreign nations the day they hand out visas and you understand deeply the desire for others to enter our nation. We have freedom, economic opportunity, and above all, a dream.

Immigration, it strikes me, renews the Dream, provides the new blood to “refresh the tree of patriots,” but for the American Dream to succeed, immigrants must adopt the American Dream, not create their own version wholesale—at least I think so. More later.

Work Ethic:

This next pillar of the American Dream is the idea of a work ethic. Now, I tend to pride myself on my “strong work ethic,” and am proud to see it appear in recommendation after recommendation. Part of me feels that by contributing to American society through my own hard work, I am in a way affirming and renewing the American Dream for myself and my country.

So, it was with great surprise that I discovered that this strong work ethic was not necessarily part and parcel of the American Dream from day one.

Now, to be sure, the idea of a Protestant Work Ethic pervades American society since the Puritan Age, as I spoke about earlier. But the incorporation, so to speak, of the strong work ethic into the American Dream is much more recent. Let me recite where I first found the inklings of a work ethic in the American Dream, written by Calvin Colton, a Whig intellectual writing as a public intellectual in the early 1800s.

“Ours is a country, where men start from an humble origin, and from small beginnings rise gradually in the world, as the reward of merit and industry, and where they can attain to the most elevated positions, or acquire a large amount of wealth, according to the pursuits they elect for themselves. No exclusive privileges of birth, no entailment of estates, no civil or political disqualifications, stand in their path; but one has as good a chance as another, according to his talents, prudence, and personal exertions. This is a country of self-made men, than which nothing better could be said of any state of society.”⁴¹

[It sounds like a pretty good formulation to me. In his extended tract, entitled *Labor and Capital*, Colton defended not only this incipient American Dream, but the entire American capitalist system. To understand Colton’s writing, you need to understand the history of the period. The industrial revolution was in full force in England, and a similar revolution in America’s economy was underway. Helped by generous federal works projects to construct roads—not highways—plain old roads to connect the states, America moved much closer to be a truly national economic market and a single economic entity, moving from a nation of rural farmers to a city and industry centered economy.

Now, Colton was hardly an impartial economic observer. When he wrote *Labor and Capital* in 1844, Colton was a staunch supporter of the newly formed Whig party. As a reaction to a long era of Democratic-Republican party dominance, the Whig Party would eventually send William Henry Harrison to the White House. Henry Clay, the great statesman, architect of the American system and the Compromise of 1850, was likewise a Whig, and Abraham Lincoln began his political career as a one term Whig Congressman.

Thus, Colton, writing in an election year in support of Henry Clay, wrote *Labor and Capital* as a defense not only of the American system of capitalism, but also to explain the Whig party’s relation with business and labor. Although Clay would lose to Democrat James K. Polk, Colton’s essay is still a powerful defense of capitalism in pursuit of the growing wealth and economic growth in America.] - Combine into shorter paragraphs.

So you might ask, what does capitalism have to do with a strong work ethic? After all, isn’t a part of capitalism rank speculation, playing the stock market, and investments that don’t require the work of your back? If this lecture must sell you on the merits of market capitalism, perhaps this will take longer than I expected! Nevertheless, let me again repeat my belief that market capitalism is what enables this pillar of the American Dream to work. We can get into an economic discussion

later on, when I discuss the critiques of the American Dream. For now, let's just take this one on face value.

Like I said in the introductory lecture, this pillar of a work ethic was always part of my own personal formulation of the American Dream. I think the reason is pretty clear, and I think we all have some formulation of at least a notion of hard work interwoven with our own conceptions of the American Dream. The story that stands out in my mind are those old Horatio Algers, rags-to-riches stories. Now, this pillar of the American Dream is another foundational one. Without a strong work ethic, the whole rags-to-riches story doesn't exist. I'm reminded again of Ripley's Game, where the anti-hero Tom Ripley stole someone else's identity. Just for kicks, why don't we take a brief look at "Ragged Dick," one of Alger's more widely distributed stories. Rumors that this book was used in the 1968 campaign for Dick Nixon are more or less unconfirmed.

*Ragged Dick synopsis.*⁴²

As much as America itself is a story, our nation and our culture revolves around stories of individual men and women; heroes, for lack of a better term, from George Washington to Abraham Lincoln, to Rambo, and I don't think it's a coincidence that the industrial and economic revolution that hit America in the late 1800's created a whole new category of hero: the self-made man. Now, I won't linger too long on the self-made man, or the rags-to-riches story, because this really belongs in a different pillar, the pillar of the common man.

As I mentioned, the Industrial revolution as a proper term refers to the industrialization of Great Britain in the late 1700s and early 1800s, a market based revolution seems to have hit America as well in the 1800s. Although Jefferson hoped for an agrarian, rural, community based society, history had other plans, and rival Alexander Hamilton may well have been pleased at how industrial America turned out.

This new industrial America presented just the opportunities for advancement that Colton pointed out, and indeed, men of talent, prudence, and personal exertions would rise to great heights, including Andrew Carnegie. An immigrant born in Scotland, Carnegie moved to the United States when he was 13. After working a number of odd jobs, he earned enough to begin investing his capital in various enterprises. Carnegie, a shrewd businessman, chose railroads, and other industries that would boom in post Civil War America, leaving him one of the wealthiest men in the country by the late 1800s. Carnegie would later write *the Gospel of Wealth*.⁴³ Although by modern standards this sounds like a religious ode to wealth, it is quite the opposite: Carnegie believed in using massive wealth for public philanthropy hall. It is no mistake that one of the country's greatest architectural and cultural legacies is . . . Carnegie Hall in New York City. His philanthropy paved the way for a generation of Gilded Age robber barons who took advantage of this promise of the reward of hard work from Colton and turned it into the wealthiest generation of Americans ever.

"I congratulate poor young men upon being born to that ancient and honourable degree which renders it necessary that they should devote themselves to hard work." - Andrew Carnegie and sure enough, Carnegie's approach encapsulated two of the most significant themes of the American Dream: its association with immigration, and a work ethic and goal of monetary success. And with such stories of common men like Andrew Carnegie making it big, well, perhaps it is a small dabble of folk hero worship that we see in our incorporation of hard work into the American Dream.

Stories of the American Dream:

If you work hard, the story goes, than you can make something of your self. This is the flip

side, the corollary, the missing piece of the section we just covered. You have to work hard—but who are you? You are the American, the common man, a self-made man, who went from rags-to-riches. For this reason, I titled this part of today’s speech “stories of the American Dream.” I will not be telling stories of men and women who achieved the American Dream, but rather, illustrate just how these stories inform our view of the men and women who achieve the Dream.

The common man is, well, common enough in America. As an aspiring politician, my own American dream does not necessarily include vast riches. Moreover, growing up in an average American suburb, I definitely did not start my life in rags. However, the rags-to-riches story is still a deeply intertwined part of the American Dream. Perhaps the best contemporary example I can think of is *Rocky*. Even before I had seen any of the movies, I knew who Rocky Balboa was, and what he stood for. Rocky was the rags-to-riches story of our day, an inarticulate, poorly educated thug from the streets of Philadelphia who was given a chance to make something of himself. After a lucky break, and a lot of—need I say it?—hard work, Rocky had the chance to “Go the Distance” against Carl Weathers’ Apollo Creed and prove something to the world—and to himself.⁴⁴

This story of an average joe who works hard and makes something of himself is quintessentially American and one of the major incarnations of the American Dream I found. It is so interwoven into American society, one only needs to turn on the TV and observe the latest Presidential election. Common themes abound: a common man, a guy with a lucky break, a man who turned his life around, and in this latest election, a woman who worked hard her whole life all are vying for the nation’s top political job. How old is this strain of a common man in presidential politics?

Very old, as it turns out. Everyone in America knows the basics of Abraham Lincoln’s life: born in a Kentucky log cabin, a prairie lawyer, and a failed candidate many times over before winning the Presidency. Although certainly technically true, this romanticized version of Lincoln’s life tends to obscure Lincoln’s major successes. Lincoln was also a smart, highly ambitious man, who plotted his rise to power over the course of decades. Heavily involved with Whig, and later Republican, politics in his adopted home state of Illinois, Lincoln managed his political ambitions and his work as a lawyer in Springfield. His ambition culminated—so he thought—in his failed attempt to win the 1858 election in Illinois for the U.S. Senate. Lincoln’s lifelong dream was actually to serve in the Senate, not the White House, and even after his election in 1860, feared that his term in the Presidency would be overshadowed by the great events happening in the Senate.⁴⁵ Of course, he had nothing to worry about, as events would soon overtake the Senate, and the greater man in the White House would solve them.

When receiving the Republican nomination for President in 1860, the GOP faced a divided Democratic party and was virtually assured of victory, so the campaign focused heavily on Lincoln’s character and background: Honest Abe, the Railsplitter from the west, born in a log cabin; in other words, the very characteristics we attribute to Lincoln even today. From the political front, Lincoln served a variety of positions, including U.S. Representative, several terms in the state legislature, and grew to command a loyalty in the state. As a lawyer, Lincoln earned most of his money representing the railroad industries—akin to a lawyer for an oil corporation—or, for that matter, a former oil executive and baseball owner—winning the Presidency today. While Lincoln was indeed a self-made man, who largely taught himself the law and worked hard to become one of the best trial lawyers in the west, his life was by no means ordinary.

If alive and well in Lincoln’s time, where did this myth of the common man come from? Our Founding Fathers were certainly not common; indeed, history often refers to the Founding

Generation as one of the greatest collection of political and philosophical minds in history. While the ruffian Benjamin Franklin certainly fits the modern American mythos of a self-made commoner who rose to prominence, remember that most of the founding generation were actually very extraordinary. George Washington, apart from his military prowess, extraordinary leadership abilities, and vision for the future, likewise was a man from a wealthy Virginia plantation and an expert horseman and hunter—the rough equivalent of looking to a wealthy, aristocratic NFL star, perhaps, to lead. Thomas Jefferson, his jealous peers would write, always held aristocratic pretensions, and in today's society, his long association with France would have been enough to mark him as slightly overbearing and patrician in his associations. John Adams, now undergoing a historical revival as a pivotal figure in our pantheon of founders, was a wealthy northeastern trial lawyer, the father of the first American political dynasty and what we might charitably call today “old money.”⁴⁶

Thus, it was not from our founding generation, who believed that high office should seek the man, as it was unseemly for an American patriot and statesman to actually run for an office such as the Presidency. Rather, this emphasis on the common man must have come from a later generation of American Presidents.

Historians traditionally refer to the 1820's as the “Era of the Common Man.” Ah hah—that phrase sounds familiar. Traditional historiography portrays these decades as a sort of calm between storms. The echoes of the revolutionary generation had died out, taking along with it the original Federalist versus Democrat-Republican debates as the Federalist party itself had withered away. The storm clouds of secession and civil war still loomed in the distance, but the Missouri Compromise had effectively settled the issue in the minds of Americans for ever. In the midst of this, Andrew Jackson, a highly successful general, but a man from the west (Tennessee) who had successfully molded his public image into that of a plain spoken, old-fashioned American who had little patience for the “monied” eastern elites and simply stood for the common people.

Jackson's victory over John Quincy Adams was doubly symbolic, for Adams was the son of John Adams, and represented the first father-son dynasty in American Presidential politics. The family dynasty was, of course, quite the norm in England, and such a similarity was not altogether lost of the American public. In this way, Jackson triumphed not just over a wealthy New Englander, but a man representing the worst influences of aristocracy in America.

Whether the “Age of Jackson” was also the “age of the common man” is disputed. A few facts stand out, however. Around this time, the last remaining barriers to full white-male suffrage were swept away. With property requirements no longer around, virtually the whole of America now saw itself as able to vote, the fulfillment of the democratic promise that Washington and Jefferson had begun during the Revolution. Of course, there were plenty still denied from voting, namely African-American slaves and women. This point aside, the fact is that more people—okay men—in history—not just American, but in the history of the world—were now able to participate in the most democratic and people-oriented nation in history. This was exciting stuff.

Once again, Tocqueville spotted the consequence of this. Equality was the name of the game in the 1820s and beyond, the equality of circumstance, wealth, and political power. Unlike England, with its aristocracy and nobled elite, America had no such formal class divisions. Although the schisms of the market revolution were already visible, which would fracture the society into classes of wealth, as a whole, the America at the time was remarkably similar in wealth and ownership. And each man had one vote, the same as his neighbor and the President. The net effect of this was to virtually require two things. First, public opinion became much more important than individual

opinion. After all, if men are equal in this democratic America of the 1820s, there is no noble or priestly class that “knows” more than anyone else. A farmer is as much a judge of the truth as his neighbor, the merchant. The truth then, would be found in public opinion, the consent of the majority. Second, to ensure this equality did not mean equality in servitude, America had to reorient its mythos to accommodate the literal “common man.” After all, if a man like Jackson could rise from humble beginnings, distinguish himself in combat, and rise to the Presidency, anyone could do so. The universal suffrage and democratic sentiment swept away the old thinking of looking to a class of men of proper upbringing and education—the Founding generation—and inaugurated a story about who can succeed in America that is still with us today.

- And what of the “rags-to-riches” story, so familiar in Horatio Alger and Andrew Carnegie? Again, I would argue here is where the influence of the Gilded Age and its soaring men of wealth and success has interjected itself permanently for now into the American Dream. The flip side of the common man of Carnegie—because of the ability of men to acquire large amounts of wealth, well, look at this.
- What of the self-made man? In a sense this is all about America, a self-made country. In another sense it is about Ben Franklin and a whole host of other people. Many American Dream references say like “to each’s dream,” and acknowledgment that not everyone will have the same dream

The Coast

- The wild wild west has always held an appeal to Americans, none more so than the state of California. Here is the stuff, to quote a completely inappropriate example, that dreams are made of. California. A place to start your new life, to reinvent yourself.
- In fact, the boom of California from disputed Mexican territory to full fledged state was helped along by a rather important discovery in 1848: Gold. In this sense, California has exemplified the more material aspect of the American Dream: the quest for riches. Of course, when we say someone has lived the American Dream and made it big, it usually implies, if not says straight out, that this man or woman is now wealthy, from nothing. And what better place for a start than a system where thousands suffered all to get-rich-quick—California.
- In many respects, this is one of the areas where the American Dream is most open to criticism. Is the American Dream intertwined so thoroughly with the notion of wealth that it is simply commercialism? I don’t believe it is, but a lot of people do, and we will discuss those complaints later.
- Of course, the Dream of California has come under fire in many ways. To quote another author on American culture, and in her case, immigration, Georgie Geyer, California was where, “American in turn went . . . looking for redemption from tedium and everyday life, for relief from the necessity of always making mature choices, and for a childhood that would last forever.”⁴⁷ To be sure, as a man who watches the behavior of the latest generation

of Hollywood “stars,” I am not about to disagree. Nevertheless, the identification of the Coast as a bigger, glitzier version of the American Dream is solid.

- California also exemplifies something else, the Hollywood system. What is a more American story, after all, than the young girl from the heartland who goes to Hollywood to seek fame and fortune? Whether she be Norma Jean Rae, or Jenna Fischer, this story is also something uniquely American—and, of course, uniquely tied into the movie system.
- Home ownership likewise never occurred to me; as a college-age renter, home ownership is not really within the realm of possibility for me right now. However, my idealized future always included a nice lakefront home I owned. Off the bat, while certainly shared by millions of Americans, I will argue that homeownership *in and of itself* is not a sole requirement or part of the American Dream. Jim Cullen counted home ownership as part of the dream of the coast.
- The final facet is reinvention, and not even necessarily for greater wealth. If I may quote one last 1980s movie—I promise!—take a look at the first ten minutes of the *Karate Kid*. Although a fixture of most of the kids in my youth, so much so that with the main actor died, one of my friends could only refer to him as Mr. Miyagi, I only saw this movie recently, and was startled to see how much of this “coastal” Dream is found in a short period. Daniel Larusso and his mother, the main characters, move from their childhood home in New Jersey out to California. His mother is recently divorced, and sure enough, is moving west to start a “new job, and a new life.” This also seems quintessentially American—in a land where your merits, and not your birth name, determine your fate, why not be able to reinvent yourself should you choose? Again, to choose a better life, and to follow your dreams.

Finally, I think a core component of the American Dream is something that is more often criticized when standing on its own than praised as a foundation for the American Dream: **American exceptionalism**. I freely admit that I am an American exceptionalist. I think that this country on balance has been a force for good in this world, not evil. I think that this country has a lot to offer, and be it the Revolutionary Generation’s awareness that this experiment in self-government would be watched the world around, or the manifestations of liberty and freedom that have so often pervaded our Presidential adventures, we are an example for the rest of the world—the shining city on a hill, if I may borrow a phrase more eloquent than anything I could devise.

- Quote from Lipset, American exceptionalism about how America is different.

American exceptionalism is old, but is it truly part of the American Dream? I think it has to be. What is the name of this very speech series? It is about, quite simply, the *American Dream*. Not the French Dream. Not the English Dream. Not the Free World Dream. The *American Dream*. Although I am by no means a world traveler, I haven’t found anything like the American Dream around the world. Sure, each country has to inspire people in its own way. When visiting Shanghai, for example, and seeing the multi-billion dollar economic investments and the glittering skyscrapers, I got the distinct impression that this investment and technology was inspiring the people of China for the future—a display of wealth and power from their economy, rather than the people themselves.

- Quote from Gutfield, American exceptionalism, about how America was intended to be not just different, but a new model for the world.

I think this caps off the American Dream's close formal definitions because as I mentioned, at its core, each element is uniquely American, drawn from our history, social experiences, and the like.

Today, I've painted what I hope is an upbeat, optimistic picture of the foundation, pillars, and roof of our hypothetical American Dream house. And yet, there are powerful, incisive, and in many ways, very real criticism of the American Dream. Some of these criticisms flow from specific pillars of the dream: a great many are related to the ideal of equality, for example—and some flow from more specific and lighter policy complaints about how the dream is achieved, or not.

The American Dream: Is it Real?

Good evening, and welcome to the fourth speech in this series on the American Dream. My name is Michael Wagner, and it is again my distinct pleasure to speak with you tonight. For those of you just joining us, I have been discussing, of course, the American Dream—what it is, what its historical antecedents are, and what it means for us today.

When I first started work on this project, I casually asked a friend of mine point blank if she believed the American Dream applied to everybody. She did not.⁴⁸ And in many ways, she is right—the American Dream, be it social mobility, equality for all, or liberty and justice is just that: a dream, an ideal, something for us to strive for. However, I believe that, just as America herself is in many ways an idea to which we can never truly reach, something that we strive for, the American Dream is something to which we can all aspire and believe in.

This is not to say that the American Dream is a magical fantasy that reveals the truth about this utopia of a country we call the United States. I can be just as hard on America's flaws as the next man. To be sure, the American Dream has never, and frankly, may never, apply to all people and all places in all times. Most obviously, while Thomas Jefferson may have intended the ideals of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness to apply to all men and women, the new nation—and indeed Jefferson himself—failed by owning slaves. Likewise, although we tout the American Dream of success, too many Americans are still in poverty and living below their means.

As Americans, we can critique the American Dream in one of three ways.

American Dream doesn't apply to everyone, or every social group equally.

First, one can argue that the Dream's basic tenets do not apply equally to everyone. This critique appears extremely often, and is often correct. The promise of America has never, and may never absolutely, reach every American. Even wrapping ourselves around the lofty ideals of the early republic, the era of the common man, and the idea of a democratic America, history can easily point to millions who did not share this success.

The addition of this notion of group equality of condition, as it were, to the American Dream has deep implications for the American Dream. In essence, if a given social group has not achieved perceived equality, they have an automatic right to criticize the American Dream.

- Quote from *Revolutionary Black Woman*.
- Quote from W.E.B Du Bois.
- Quote from Stanton's address to NY state legislature.

Of course, new social groups continually find cause to argue with the successful, optimistic view of the American Dream. For example, Mexican-Americans, not traditionally thought of as an underprivileged group in historical America, as expressed through its authors:

“For Mexican American writers, the so-called American Dream of affluence, respectability, and happiness has held little attraction, seeming at turns an essentially harmless illusion and a cruel and insidious hoax.”⁴⁹

- This is a pretty straightforward argument, saying that because of historical patterns of

oppression, that sort of thing, the American Dream is a lie because not every group is treated the same or has the same outcome of circumstance.

American Dream is a hype for Wealth and Consumerism

The second critique, in my opinion, is something of a misnomer. This critique is actually a broader critique of American society and culture, wrapped up in the critique of the American Dream. This critique, as I spoke about earlier, is that the American Dream is bankrupt, focused on wealth above all. For example, William James, a noted something, derisively referred to it as “the exclusive worship of the bitch goddess Success . . . our national disease.”⁵⁰

- Many of these critiques come from literature or the arts. The Great Gatsby, Normal Mailer, Death of a Salesman, *Wall Street*. Recap some of the stories, briefly, and explain what about them is critiquing the American Dream.
- Interestingly enough, they also come from times when the nation is prosperous: the 20s, 50s, 80s, and 90s. When times are tough, in the 30s, the 40s, the 70s, the circumstances alone provided reason enough to question the American Dream without having to criticize the culture at large.

American Dream is a Policy That Doesn't Work.

The final common critique is that the American Dream is a myth, a farce, an ideal that we cannot in fact live up to. This type of critique is often found in wide-ranging policy books, touting a loss of American ideals in our economic or foreign policy.

- It is a strike at individual equality of opportunity, or liberty of opportunity—either way, incisive.
- Barbara Ehrenreich's book, *Nickel and Dimed*, presents a case. First off, this is a case study approach. And it's not a bad one. She goes undercover as an entry level worker, and tries to move up the ladder from minimum wage to a middle class life—upward mobility—and fails.
- She attempts to demonstrate that our economic policy and cultural structure sets up the American Dream to fail. And if it fails for her and the vast majority of people she works with, is the American Dream then valid if it doesn't work for everyone, or even most people?

Rebuttal One

Well, is this true today? It certainly was in the 1800s, when the law prevented blacks and women from voting. It certainly was in the 1950s, when segregation ruled the day. This is policy. Is there anything today *inherent* within any of the pillars of the American Dream that de facto excludes minority groups or is too hard to achieve? If anything, the lottery is the corruption of the American Dream, exchanging something hard and guaranteed for something easy and virtually impossible. I cannot say that there is, and by default, the American Dream is neither completely

dead, nor completely a lie...

- I ask, why is it that if a given social group in America does not somehow have equal or over-represented power in Congress, power in industry, wealth, and influence, they are considered failures of the American Dream?

Here in lies the absolute problem with using societal equality as an absolute condition of the American Dream. For better or worse, societal equality will never truly exist. I say this not to justify the existence of poverty, as some have suggested, or to justify bigotry or hatred on part of anyone. Rather, I say this because the history of America has been that of new groups, new societies, and new people coming to this country, starting off small, and achieving the American Dream. It is the fulfillment of the ideal of generational equality. And by narrowly chaining the American Dream to the idea that each and every social division *must* be *absolutely* equal, or close to it, this sets up the American Dream to fail automatically, without recognizing just how true the American Dream is for everyone—over time.

For my money, the most obvious and vivid example that this critique of the American Dream is not 100% true is to look at the nation's headlines, where Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama battle for the Democratic nomination for the Presidency. A woman and a black man, one of whom will be the first nominee of either "class" for the Presidency, and either with a legitimate shot at one of the last few offices and positions in our nation to be exclusively held by white men. And that fact alone puts lie to the contention that the American Dream is dead.

Now, let me expand upon this a little, and examine both candidates. First is the simple fact of their gender and race. This seems obvious enough I can leave it at that—and more important, is the fact that after over a year of Presidential politics, I *can* leave it at that. Americans are not reacting in droves by beating up women or lynching blacks in protest (which, honestly, probably never would have happened even in, say, pre Civil War America), but embracing what to many feels like a natural transition in American society—or among my generation, no transition at all.

Moreover, both Senators are not what we might consider to be truly elite, in contrast to their putative predecessor, President George W. Bush. Bush, we should agree, is about as close to an aristocratic scion as we can come in this country, the son of a President, and a member of a family long involved in politics. This is, of course, not true of either Democrat. Despite her marriage to the forty-second President, Hillary Rodham started out as a relatively average middle class American in Illinois; her father worked in textiles, her mother, a homemaker. She has reached the upper echelons of American politics perhaps by her husband's influence, but no doubt her Yale law degree and successful career would have carried her far either way. Likewise, Barack Obama, who grew up principally in Hawaii, had no conceivable familial background in politics or government. He likewise achieved his meteoric rise in U.S. politics—going from state organizer to U.S. Senator in just a few years—through his own achievements, transferring to Columbia University, to Harvard law school, and to Presidential candidate. This, I believe, illustrates my second point about the American Dream: in America, neither of these candidates were restricted to their middle class upbringing, and were able to, well, move through class to achieve their dreams. Or at least one of them will in a few months!

In other words, the fact that these candidates are viable options for the Democratic Presidential nomination gives lie to the notion that somehow, the American Dream will never apply to all groups equally. The fact these candidates did not start with privilege or silver spoons in their

mouths gives lie to the notion that, somehow, the American Dream is dead and that one cannot find success in their life. I am not for a moment saying that everyone can become a Presidential candidate, or that minority groups in the United States are on a totally equal footing with the majority. I am saying, however, that if you look at these fierce critiques, look at the cries that “the American Dream” is dead, or that “the American Dream never was true, doesn’t apply to blacks or women” or whichever minority group, all these critiques, if you take them to their logical end, requires that either no member of a minority group reach the success that either Senator Clinton or Senator Obama has, or that either of them must come from a privileged background. Neither of this is true, and to me, that says a lot.

Rebuttal Two

So, is the American Dream just about wealth? If I may quote our favorite historian, James Truslow Adams one more time, he continued: “It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”⁵¹ I ask you, what have we explored in the past few days? The American Dream is about opportunity, about the chance for a better life—which, to be sure, for most includes a better standard of living, but not narcissistic consumerism, either.

- First off, I am surprised at how much traction this critique has held. It is not critiquing the American Dream, but a consumer culture, which is slightly different. The American Dream is part of American culture, but American culture is not just the American Dream.
- Moreover, look at what we just spoke about, this complex equality part of the American Dream. Does that have anything to do with the accumulation of individual wealth? Of course not!

Finally, how much traction does this sort of critique even hold anymore? When it first came out in the nineteen-fifties, certainly Arthur Miller’s well-written critique of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman* was noteworthy. The country was experiencing one of the greatest successes of wealth and widespread content in its history, and for a noted playwright and thinker like Miller to pen a work directly criticizing this content, well, it would have come as a shock. And yet, how substantive is this critique? Miller’s point, repeated throughout the years by plays like *Glengarry Glen Ross*, is essentially this: that the American Dream is a crock and meaningless because, as you can so clearly see in this play or this book, there are people for whom the American Dream does not work or apply, and for whom this culture is demeaning and degrading. *Deliver with sarcasm.*

The problem is, repeating that critique over two generations without changing it at all renders it fairly weak. We’ve all heard some variation thereof of this challenge to the American Dream, and yet I believe firmly that the American Dream is just as strong today. We are an optimistic people, as optimistic and committed to the belief that our future will be better as any nation on the planet, and this inherent optimism is what dooms Miller’s criticism of the American Dream. In the end, the American Dream is alive today, despite Miller’s plays, and this tells me that the American people have considered the meaning of the American Dream, considered what would happen if we were to

adapt the rigid message that a lack of universal application means failure, and rejected this criticism. In essence, Miller and his specific criticism failed to kill the American Dream. So the opponents of the American Dream will have to come up with something new.

To bring this to a more policy level analogy, think of the critiques of the American welfare system brought by Reagan in 1980. At the time, his criticism of the welfare state, bloated government, and out of control bureaucracy resonated with Americans, contributing to his two terms in office and what is more broadly the Reagan revolution. And yet today, however true they might have been at the time, politicians cannot simply blindly and simply parrot Reagan's critiques of thirty years ago. The times have changed, of course, and the arguments against the welfare state have changed with it.

And, much the same way, the Miller critique of the American Dream, the simple critique saying that, look, America, there are people in America who live the "dark side" of the American Dream, who can't get ahead all the time, has to be changed. They've been leveling this critique at the American Dream for the past two generations, and yet the American Dream has survived and continues to flourish. The Miller critique will always be with us, and yet, I think it has been shown, will never be true.

Rebuttal Three

- Now, Ehrenreich's criticism is slightly newer. Instead of simply arguing it doesn't work, she attempts a serious, policy-level explanation of why. As I said in the beginning, this is not a policy paper, but Ehrenreich's style of criticism demands a policy response.
- Refer to the book *Scratch Beginnings*. Adam Shepard is a student who read Ehrenreich's book and wondered if it was true. He did the same thing, disguising himself as a homeless man, and in the course of a few months, earned thousands of dollars, bought a car, secured promotions, and stable housing. He was able to do it, and although yes, he is a white male, you have to believe this had more to do with his motivation than any exterior barriers. More importantly, the fact he did it, and others did it, belies Ehrenreich's argument that as a general whole, no one can do it any more.
- Finally, look at economic trends as a whole. The people in poverty today are not the same people who were in poverty two generations ago, or even one generation ago. Social classes move up. Again, from the equality rebuttal, Irish-Americans are no longer the underclass of American society, and in another generation, another social group will be. But the facts are that these groups do move up. I cannot predict what group they will be, but can without hesitation say with certainty that whatever this group is, they will embrace the American Dream just as we all have. Her critique is individual, on what she could or could not achieve, but this is also about today's generation of people. Look more broadly.
- Immigrants still join society, and the poorer levels do move up. I think no one would argue that today, Irish-Americans or Italian-Americans are the poorest social group because they got here through a large immigration push. Of course, in the past decades, these social groups have worked their way up the ladder of success, finding ways to achieve the American Dream. I have no doubt that given time, the current immigrant wave of Hispanics

will do the same, and we will find another group to call the “underprivileged”—perhaps it will be a wave of Chinese immigrants if the communists fall from power, or perhaps a wave of Indian immigrants as their country reaches higher levels of success.

- In the end, the American Dream is not dependent on specific policies: this is not the American Dream of Tax Cuts or the American Dream of a Living Wage. It is broader, and is about *dreams*.

The American Dream: The Future and the Present

- Introduction: Welcome back to the last night of a series of speeches on the American Dream. It's good to see everyone.
- Brief remarks on contemporary conceptions or expressions of the American Dream: American Idol, American Gladiators, the McDonalds coffee burning incident. Are these "post-ironic" slanders of the American Dream, reflections of American culture, or modern affirmations?
- Transition: Is the American Dream still alive and relevant?

Taking you back to the Presidential campaign we started by quoting, we hear invocations of the classic American Dream, the more lofty version about opportunity, freedom, and equality, in the political sphere every day. So, first and foremost, the American Dream is not dead. It is clearly and obviously alive and well in at least our national political discourse, which, I submit to you, is not a bad place to keep an idea alive. I don't think the American Dream will ever disappear from politics because good politics is often the art of the possible, and the American Dream at its best is the most optimistic vision of the possible we have.

If the American Dream is not dead, however, has it outgrown its usefulness? After all, my first exposure to the American Dream was through its conventional definition, and then right after that in contrast, the satirical definition about burning yourself on hot coffee and suing the company to get rich quick. Is the American Dream as a political and social concept, as an element of American society and culture, still necessary? After all, by demonstrating how the themes of the American Dream can be found throughout American history, one can plausibly argue that if you remove the American Dream, these themes remain, and thus the American Dream serves no concrete function except perhaps as a "collection" of various American ideals. I—of course—argue that this is not the case, and that the American Dream serves two distinct and necessary functions for American society. First, the American Dream serves as one of the elements that binds this staggeringly diverse nation together in spirit and in hopes; and second, the American Dream is a good and useful example of American values which may be necessary to invoke when comparing our way of life to other civilizations around the world as international relations become increasingly fragmented and uncertain.

When first researching this project, the fact there is no consensus definition of the American Dream, no single definitive list of the core ideals of the American Dream rankled me. There are a lot of different ideas floating around about what the American Dream is, some in agreement, some unrelated to the other, and some completely at odds with each other, as I think we've seen in the past few days. Now, isn't this bad? As an aspiring lawyer and a man comfortable with constants, I like specific, concrete definitions. With so many different conceptions and ideas of the American Dream, can we as Americans ever agree on a single commonly accepted American Dream? History suggests we may not, in fact.

To explain this, I once again turn to Alexis de Tocqueville and his analysis of equality in America. While it is our greatest strength, there is another consequence and weakness inherent in our society. A consequence of this is the ability of the English language to become muddled through imprecise and colloquial use.⁵² After one hundred years, a good number of English words might be

different simply due to the overwhelmingly democratic nature of the society. Unlike, say, France, which literally has a government commission to approve changes or additions to the language, Americans generally make this stuff up as we go along.

This is worth keeping in mind when one considers certain phrases in the American lexicon. Free speech. Civil rights. Equality. These words resonate within us as Americans, and yet, have surprisingly broad definitions depending on who you ask. For example: Equality. For some, as you know, equality for all hearkens back memories of the civil rights movement; for others, this is associated intimately with the women's rights movement; and for still others, the growing protests on behalf of gay and lesbian communities. And, in many respects, this democratic nature of our language and our ideas explains well the transformation of the Declaration of Independence from a literal minded, international and political document into what Jim Cullen could term the "Dream Charter" for the American Dream.

The American Dream itself is, of course, also part of this national lexicon, as a phrase and an ideal with both near-universal acceptance, and extraordinary flexibility and varied meanings. Is this similarly broad, flexible approach to the American Dream a good thing?

To answer that, I had to think about one of the "*raison d'être*s" (borrowing a French word seemed strangely appropriate) for the American Dream. G.K. Chesterton famously wrote, "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed."⁵³ And I believe he is correct: our American identity revolves around not a common religion or a common ethnicity, but common principles, as we have explored in our retelling of the settling of the American continent.

Now, to be sure, America is not the only nation that is founded at least in part on ideals. However, unlike other nations based strongly or largely on ideals, the United States is physically much, much larger. Compared to a homogenous nation such as, say, the Netherlands, with sixteen point five million inhabitants spread out over sixteen thousand square miles, the United States is literally nearly two hundred times as populous and as many times as massive.⁵⁴ Our population exceeded three hundred million inhabitants a few years ago, and within fifty years is projected to reach four hundred million—third only to China and India. The question of how to unite so many people under a single flag and government then becomes much more important—especially when looking at India and China and realizing that neither nation is well known for cultural diversity. Many nations do achieve national cohesion through a common ethnicity, language, ancestry, or experience, especially smaller nations such as Denmark or England. The United States' three hundred million are from around the world. In the end, despite what I said about our Puritan and economic foundations in Massachusetts Bay and Jamestown, at a certain point in history, only a few decades after our founding, Americans could never again say "We are all sons of England," never able to say "We are all Anglicans," never able to say "We are all descendants of this continent." Instead, Americans had to say "We are all united around these ideals."

The American Dream, then, is one of those ideals, helping to unite so many diverse people around the red, white, and blue. It's not the only thing, of course—the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the flag, and our aforementioned national lexicon of "liberty," "free speech," and for some, "due process, are also important unifying ideals. I acknowledge that some of the definitions of the American Dream we've explored may not hold true for absolutely everyone, and that the American Dream itself is the subject of much criticism, but I believe the ideals and American heritage found in the Dream can and do promise opportunity and liberty for every single American.

The genius of the American Dream, then, is its ability to unite almost every American around a unifying vision for our lives and the future. Although I like concrete definitions, I reluctantly

resigned myself to the notion that there can be no single, overarching, definitive version of the American Dream. Instead, I think it strangely appropriate of the American Dream to be something that defies easy explanation or definition. It is only with a concept flexible and adaptable that it is capable of uniting a land of 300 million. As I hope I've demonstrated too, this is not an ad hoc, or an incoherent ideology. Rather, the American Dream has its groundings in a pursuit for a better life, and has several elements in its pillars that distinguish it from other important American ideologies. Separation of powers may be a core of our government and belief about human identity, but I couldn't find too much of this expression in studies of the American Dream.

With this argument about the necessity of the American Dream for our own society in mind, how does the American Dream fit into the broader global context? Can the American Dream serve a useful purpose outside American borders? After all, the American Dream is integral to what it means to be an American and most of the world's population is not, of course, American. And, as I argued earlier, there is an element of American exceptionalism found in the dream, unique in its terminology. After all, no other country has a "dream" linked to its national identity.

Additionally, I think it's no secret that the United States has taken a beating under the Bush Administration. I refer not to his Administration's actions, but the real and undisputable fact that in the past decade, America's image in the eyes of the world has fallen. Most major nations view us with thinly veiled, if not outright, contempt. I can't count the number of stories I've heard from friends abroad who encountered ambivalence, to say the least, about their nationality.

Finally, there is a popular idea going around that multiculturalism is the way to go in the future. Used domestically, this is the idea that multiple cultures can coexist, and that America, as the nation of immigrants, is the best place to find this. This goes beyond the standard diversity argument, arguing that instead of allowing immigrants to retain certain aspects of their culture, while subscribing primarily to the American creed and our way of life and ideals, that instead we should be so respectful of other cultures as to not impose any part of American ideals on them, and let them retain their own culture wholesale. The problem for me is that this formulation of multiculturalism is based on the premise that all cultures are equal, and I don't believe that to be true. I believe, for example, the American Dream is one thing that puts the American culture above many others. For those who have attacked the American Dream in the past, I wonder if they would rather live in a culture where women are stoned to death for adultery? Or if they would rather live in a culture where a culture of the collective good can justify killing protesters in a square? I think not, and I think the simple fact that in many ways, America's values are different and, dare I say it, better than a lot of other places leads me to reject this brand of multiculturalism, and consequently, its affect on the American Dream. After all, if your conception of the American Dream has to do with creating a dictatorial society, I think I can safely say that's not good for America. I don't reject diversity; many of my best experiences have come working with diverse groups of individuals. However, I don't accept the premise that all diversity is good, either.

This diversity argument extends beyond who believes what in America, and takes a global reach when we consider the differing cultures and values, the differing ideologies we can see around the globe. Much like during the Cold War, I believe that in the next few years, America will once again need something like the American Dream to justify her values and place in the world. As a bit of background: how many of you are familiar with the theory of the "end of history?" For those of you who are not, this theory was developed by international relations professor Francis Fukuyama shortly after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. This theory speculated that we had reached the end of history, and that liberal democracies would triumph. His theory was sound—the Soviet Union had

fallen apart, and communist governments and economics were pretty definitively proven poor.

That all changed on September 11, when a new ideology, driven by Al-Qaeda's murderous fascist vision for an Islamic empire. In the past few years, the question of whether liberal democracy was the right path became far more real, as America's standing and power in the world fell, and other countries' power—countries with very different value systems and ideologies—rose. So much so that professor Robert Kagan, another distinguished international relations professor, recently authored a book declaring we are not at the end of history at all, merely a phase through, and that civilizations will have some choices to make in the future.

Recently, former Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney laid out his vision of the world. Although he is not a professor or international relations expert, he outlined a view of alternative theories of the future state that I found compelling. In essence, the 21st century may not be the American century, and there are four options for how to structure global intercourse and exchange. The first, autocracy and limited capitalism, using energy resources as a means to power; the second, communism and political repression combined with street-level capitalism, leaving choice in the hands of consumers, and power in the hands of the government; in the third, political violence to further fascism like al-Qaeda; and the fourth, the United States' combination of liberty and equality.⁵⁵ It should go without saying that the American Dream—a vision of opportunity, equality, and hope—is only found in one of these four visions for the future.

In the end, although each system is a “dream” for those at the top, I think it's clear which one of these four ideologies offers the chance at a dream for those at the bottom, too. In the end, this offer of a better life is still the most compelling vision for the future I've heard so far. One that treats people like . . . well, people, as individuals, with hopes and, need I say it, dreams. Not a system that treats people as economic units, not a system that treats people as units of manpower to command, not a system that treats people as in need of government largess.

And I'd like to say this is why the lines for American visas are still longer than any other nation's. I'd like to say this is why last year, the 50,000 visa applications the State Department accepts were claimed in one day. Now, as we mentioned in our discussion on immigration, this could be because of a global pattern of strife which has altered migratory patterns. The world is in constant flux, with certain regions—and you know which ones—in greater discontent than in the 1980s or the 1990s. And yet, if this is based solely on increasing wealth, why is it America that receives the most applications, and not, say, the equally wealthy and stable England or France? Or China, for that matter, which seems eager to gobble up as many foreign dollars as possible? Could it be that the American Dream, with its promise of equality, the rule of law, and endless opportunity is what truly drives our image?

It's possible, but to promote American values, we have to send a good image, a good message of what America is and is not. Until recently, the images coming out of China were not good—images of the Chinese military mowing down protesters in Tiananmen Square. And today, like it or not, images of U.S. troops abusing prisoners at Abu Gharib, and of a Presidential Administration equivocating on the question of whether or not we torture, are just as harmful. Moreover, in today's world, this is moving too fast for any government to control. It's part of globalization, not just the moving of goods and services more quickly and more efficiently across borders, but the moving of ideas around the world with lightning speed. Have any of you read Thomas Friedman's book *The World is Flat*? I encourage you all to read it, it is a wonderful primer on globalization. Although it focuses principally on the political and economic impact of globalization, Friedman makes a sobering point about the positive and negative impacts of

globalization. In his 11/9 to 9/11 comparison, he notes that the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, opened up a new world, literally, of possibilities, of the exchange of goods, service, people, and ideas on a scale never before thought possible. Although the world has reaped the benefits of free market capitalism and a global exchange of ideas, this has also made possible the ability of nineteen men to enter the United States, and for a more negative idea, political radical Islam, to enter the global discourse, culminating on September 11.⁵⁶ In short, because people and ideas are freer than ever to move around the world, it no longer takes a madman like an Adolf Hitler, a national leader, to spread hatred and bad ideas. Sometimes all it takes is an angry man in a cave and internet access.

The best way to beat a bad idea, however, is with a good idea, and unquestionably, this globalization of free trade and free ideas can be good for America—if we use it wisely. Like the founding fathers, like the abolitionists, and like the cold warriors, I am convinced that the American Dream is a powerful and positive for our values and our heritage as a people. I think that freedom is a wonderful gift we have, and that our freedom allows us to pursue our dreams, something that too few people around the world are able to do. I think the American Dream at its best is a reflection of the promise we have as a society, and that told right, the stories of the American Dream communicated around the world will beat radical Islam every single time. As I alluded to a few days ago, although our Declaration of Independence was written narrowly, the founders did have a vision of America as a model to the world. America, and the American Dream, should—and if you ask me, *will*—continue to be that model.

To close this evening, I'd like to return to the present, the 2008 Presidential campaign, and the words of one of our candidates.

*This is what the people I've met believe about the country they love. It doesn't matter if they're Democrats or Republicans; whether they're from the smallest towns or the biggest cities; whether they hunt or they don't; whether they go to church, or temple, or mosque, or not. We may come from different places and have different stories, but we share common hopes, and one very American dream.*⁵⁷ - Barack Obama

Although as a Republican myself I will not be voting for the man, I am impressed by his rhetoric and by the power of his message. Yes, we are all Americans, despite what the red state-blue state obsessed pollsters and pundits will tell you. And, like the Senator from Illinois says, one of those commonalities among us all is the American Dream. Mr. Obama's definition of the American Dream is probably a little different from mine, probably a little more biased in favor of a liberal public policy agenda than mine, and yet I have no doubt that our American Dreams share these key things in common—a belief that America is the best hope for the world. A belief that at the core of the American Dream and the American experiment lies the hope for a better life for ourselves and our posterity. A belief that in America, dreams really can come true.

We've covered quite a lot in these past few days, and I want to thank all of you for sticking around this week to listen to me speak about this place we call America, and this thing we call the American Dream. I believe the American Dream is really one of the best expressions of who we are as Americans, and that our national culture and our national heritage and values have much to do with how we view this dream. The complexity, richness, and diversity of the American Dream, although perhaps frustrating to the amateur researcher like me, is nonetheless a beautiful reflection of the wonderously varied makeup of our society, full of men and women who every day wake up

to a new morning in America, and have the opportunity to pursue their happiness. Like them, I still believe in the American Dream, and after this week, I hope you yourselves can spend some time not just to think about the promise of this nation, but to dream, and to believe.

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