

The Atlantic

Why the American Dream Will Never Die

Over the next two months, *The Atlantic* will explore many different visions of the American dream, in stories, videos, and photo essays.



Shannon Stapleton / Reuters

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The American dream has been on life support for all of its 84 years.

The moment James Truslow Adams coined the term in his book *The Epic of America* in 1931, the death watch for the dream began. It was the very depth of the Great Depression, after all, hardly the time for a national legend of progress and self-fulfillment to flourish. In 1932, as Lawrence Samuel

recounts in his book about the dream, a professor told a graduating class at Mount Holyoke that the dream was being frustrated. By 1933, Samuel writes, playwrights were staging sardonic morality plays in which the dream is gradually swallowed in successive generations by Communist fervor.

The dream continued dying all throughout the 20th century. One account of its decline contends that the real dream was murdered sometime shortly after World War II, and swapped for the cheap, consumerist facsimile with which Americans have been living ever since. This idea that the American dream was focused on material attainment crystallized between 1945 and 1975, said Jim Cullen, author of a history of the dream. And if it's true, if the dream is diminished from an aspiration as lofty as the possibility of self-fulfillment to one as small and tangible as a white picket fence, then Americans aren't really dreaming anymore, they've merely been lulled into a stupor.

In 1961, right in the midst of the period Cullen described, Eleanor Roosevelt took to *The Atlantic* to voice this concern. In an essay called "What Has Happened to the American Dream?" the former First Lady wrote:

The future will be determined by the young, and there is no more essential task today, it seems to me, than to bring before them once more, in all its brightness, in all its splendor and beauty, the American dream, lest we let it fade, too concerned with ways of earning a living or impressing our neighbors or getting ahead or finding bigger and more potent ways of destroying the world and all that is in it.

Proclamations of the dream's death haven't really let up. "The fact is, the

American dream is dead,” Donald Trump recently declared as he announced his bid for President. *Altnet* and *Mic.com* have dueling arrays of charts to show anyone who claims the dream is still alive. Here at *The Atlantic*, we’ve gone as far as to declare it dead in the South, at least. Four years ago, *The Onion* was actually on the scene reporting shortly after the official time of death.



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Yet the octogenarian dream has proven remarkably hard to kill off. Again and again, its death has been noted, and mourned. Politicians promise they’ll revive it. (The second half of Donald Trump’s quote: “The fact is, the American dream is dead—but if I win, I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before.”) And yet somehow, a few years later, it turns out to have been alive enough to have its death proclaimed all over again.

The eternal story of the dream’s decline reflects a profound nostalgia. To believe the dream is dying, you have to believe it once flourished. But there’s an alternate story of the dream, in which the dream is an ideal that remains unobtained. It is not dead, so much as it is unborn. When the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. articulated his own dream, deeply rooted in the American dream, he wasn’t talking about a desiccated remnant of an idealized past, because to him, no version of that past could be ideal. He was, instead, imagining a better future.

Two years after King’s famous speech, James Baldwin met William F. Buckley in a debate at Cambridge University on the question of whether the American dream comes at the expense of the American Negro. For Baldwin, like King, a reckoning had to happen before the dream would even be thinkable: “Until the moment comes when we the Americans, we the

American people, are able to accept the fact that my ancestors are both black and white,” Baldwin said, “that on that continent we are trying to forge a new identity for which we need each other, and that I am not a ward of America, I am not an object of missionary charity, I am one of the people who built the country—until this moment, there is scarcely any hope for the American dream. Because the people who are denied participation in it by their very presence will wreck it. And if that happens, it’s a very grave moment for the West.”

The fundamental tension in the dream—both the reason it keeps dying and the reason that, for some, it hasn’t yet been born—is that every American is supposed to share in it, yet many Americans envision it very differently. In her book about race and the American dream, Harvard professor Jennifer Hochschild wrote that these ambiguities in the dream “matter to more than philosophers debating its logic. They matter to its ability to function as the dominant ideology of a large and complex society.” Between lamenting the death of the dream and longing for its realization, Americans don’t seem to spend much time describing what it can be. Sometimes, their versions of the dream are at odds with one another. “What is the price of any given American Dream, and who pays it?” asks Cullen, at the close of his book. “Are some dreams better than others?”

Over the next two months, *The Atlantic* will be exploring these and other questions about the many different versions of the American dream. In a series of stories, videos and photo essays, we’ll be taking a closer look at the dream’s many incarnations in the lives of individuals around the country. We’ll be plunging deeper into the results of our recent survey, conducted with the Aspen Institute, on how Americans feel about the dream. We’ll assess the dream’s presence in contemporary American culture, as well as outside the U.S. And we’d love to hear stories of what the dream represents to you, whether your vision of the dream is dead, dying, or hasn’t yet been

born.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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