The New American Dream

However much our economy may change, the behaviors and predispositions of Americans remain remarkably constant—much as Alexis de Tocqueville predicted. Certainly, the Internet-based entrepreneurs of the twenty-first century resemble Tocqueville's nineteenth century American farmer. Tocqueville described his subjects as having "acquired or retained sufficient education and fortune to satisfy their own wants. They owe nothing to any man, they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands." In both the Industrial and Information Age, Americans continue to "stand alone" in expressing their love of country and belief that they can accomplish almost anything. A recent poll found 91% agreed with the statement, "Being an American is a big part of who I am." Only 11% said they would like to emigrate elsewhere—a sharp contrast with one-third of Britons and Germans, and one-fifth of the French and Canadians, who would prefer living somewhere else. Frenchman Clotaire Rapaille captured this unique aspect of American patriotism: "The inner life of America is not a place—Canada is a place. Maybe the best place in the world. But if you are Canadian and you have a dream, you leave. Why? Because America is not a place. It is a dream."

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That dream contains three elements: (1) a celebration of freedom, (2) the enthronement of the individual, and (3) a firm belief in equality of opportunity. Taken together, these values comprise an ideology that is often referred to as classical liberalism...

Hard work and success that often accompanies it have reinforced the American devotion to classical liberalism. Political scientist Louis Hartz once noted that this ideology was especially well-suited to a prosperous and confident middle class. Indeed, the American devotion to liberalism is so strong that it pervades our language and the way we speak about things that are inherently political. Phrases such as "the American Dream" and "the American Way of Life" are freely used in everyday conversations with hardly any explanation given. The term "American Dream" was first coined by historian James Truslow Adams, writing about the presidency of John Quincy Adams. The historian noted that the sixth president believed his country stood for opportunity, "the chance to grow into something bigger and finer, as bigger and finer appealed to him." With the turn of the centuries, little has changed. Growing up in rural Midland, Texas, George W. Bush became familiar with the city's motto posted on an billboard at the edge of town: "The sky's the limit." Having unlimited possibilities is a feeling common to most Americans: nearly two-thirds say they have been able to live the American dream, and 71% believe it is possible for anyone to achieve it. In 1998, Henry Johnson, a successful middle-class black man from DeKalb County, Georgia, gave a powerful testimonial to the continuity of the American dream:

I think the American dream is alive and well, and I think I could sell the American dream to my kids through myself. This stuff about working hard and being...
"America is not a place. It is a dream."

"Even those who are well-to-do now ask themselves, ‘Is this all there is?’"