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An excerpt from THE VALUES DIVIDE
By John Kenneth White

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 expect nothing from 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 eras, 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."

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 a 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

morally sound and the more you give, the more you receive and things will come to you—I think those are all things that are not fantasies. Those things can happen and, through my own experiences, those things have happened.... Like I said, I believe in the American dream, I do.

"'America is not a place. It is a dream.'"

Sitting nearby, Johnson's wife told the interviewer, "Wow, that was good; quote him on that."

Today, when asked to define the American dream, 25% say it is having a good family life and taking care of one's family; 20% talk about the freedom to choose; 19% mention having financial stability and making a good living; 16% respond that it is achieving success and reaching one's goals; 16% say it is enjoying life and achieving happiness; 11% cite home ownership; and 10% claim it is having a good job and being happy with your work. Certainly, having financial wealth is an important part of the American dream, and in the "dot com" Information Age, Bill Gates is its best-known symbol. Gates has become a modern-day Horatio Alger figure who is almost universally admired for his ingenuity and dedication to hard work. With an estimated net worth of *$90 billion*, Gates consistently appears on Gallup's "most admired man" list. Two-thirds of those polled view him favorably, and many see him as the premier business leader of the twentieth century. An astounding one-third name Gates as the greatest business figure of the last *thousand years*.

As these numbers indicate, Gates's success is generally celebrated—despite recent attempts by the US government to break up Microsoft. This, too, has much in common with the past. A 1940 *Fortune* magazine survey found 74% rejected the idea that there "should be a law limiting the amount of money an individual is allowed to earn in a year." Throughout history, the American dream has served as a reference point for achieving financial security. During the "me" decade of the 1980s, for example, most saw the American dream in these terms: 61% said it was doing better than one's parents; 79% spoke of home ownership; 58% said it was starting your own business; 52% said it was rising from being a clerk to company president.

In the 1990s, there was a shift away from an American dream centered in materialism toward one founded on spiritual and family values—including the achievement of love and attaching a broader meaning to one's existence. A recent survey among young people aged twenty to thirty-nine found two-thirds said their number-one personal goal in life was to do whatever they wanted. One-fifth hoped to work on behalf of society, and only 6% said they wanted to get rich. Aware of these new realities, Madison Avenue's Citibank recently dropped its "Why Aren't You a Millionaire Yet?" television slogan in favor of an advertisement celebrating life's simpler pleasures. The bank now tells prospective clients that the surest way to "get rich quick" is to play with your kids. So swift is the transformation that the world's most powerful financial institution now uses the tag line, "There's more to life than money."

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

Likewise, the memorable 1999 Discover brokerage commercial featuring a scruffy tow-truck driver whose day-trading talents earned him enough money to buy his own island is banished from the airwaves. Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich writes that in the 1990s financial institutions enticed customers saying, "Come with us and make a bundle." "Now," he says, "people are thinking about saving a little bit more, slowing down, getting a life." Pollster John Zogby finds such a redefinition of the American dream to include more love and less materialism appeals to lower income groups who believe that material wealth is elusive. Marge Magner, head of Citigroup's consumer businesses, says of her company's advertisements: "Our target customer is not the person who thinks they're going to become a millionaire with the next IPO." Yet, even those who are well-to-do now ask themselves, "Is this all there is?"

In asking and answering this question, an increasing number of Americans are making significant lifestyle changes.... While Americans are more prosperous than ever before, most agree that prosperity does not bring them happiness (many think they are happier than Bill Gates, for example). Thus, they are willing to question prosperity's value in an age that seems lacking in spiritual values. Put another way, the table is full but there remains a feeling of emptiness after the meal.
