An Ideology Regnant

By Everett Carll Ladd

Frank Luntz and Ron Dermer argue forcefully that for many Americans the
"Dream" is seen to be dying and that for some it is already dead. Because the US is
a creedal nation—founded on ideas rather than traditional ethnicity—and incorporates
people of enormously diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, even the substantial
weakening of the ideas and expectations associated with the "American Dream" pro-
doundly threatens the entire fabric of Ameri-
can nationality.

I disagree with Luntz and Dermer on
whether it is in jeopardy. But before ex-
ploring this disagreement I should stress
that I do not disagree at all with the argu-
ment that, should America's defining ide-
ology and its central assumptions in fact be
eroding, that would be uniquely destruc-
tive. Many Americans, and many foreign
visitors such as G.K. Chesterton, whom
Luntz cites, have recognized the ideologi-
Cal character of this nation's foundation.

To deny its founding ideas, or to lose
confidence in them, would cut America
adrift. Presumably, large numbers of people
would continue to occupy the territory which
is the legal entity called the US. But the
only America the world has ever known is
fundamentally an idea, and any substantial
transformation of that idea—the death of
the "American Dream"—would be such a
transformation—would destroy the historic
American nation.

Given the importance of the ideology,
it's hardly surprising that successive gen-
erations of Americans have worried about
its vitality and seen it somehow in peril. In
recent years, a host of commentators have
lamented what they perceived to be eco-
omic decline so profound that it might
erode the view of America as a successful
society. Democratic candidates saw na-
tional hopes and expectations at risk in
1988 and 1992. Now at least one Republi-
can candidate for the presidency in 1996,
former education secretary Lamar
Alexander, is arguing that the Dream is
eroding as families cry out for better schools
and worry that they will be unable to main-
tain a standard of living up to their parents'.

Ideology Unchanging

I have examined much of the relevant
survey data on the current status of Ameri-
can ideals elsewhere, including in a re-
cently published monograph on The Ameri-
can Ideology. At the core of this ideology
is an extraordinary and far-reaching in-
dividualism, which pervades and shapes all
of the other components of American val-
ues, giving them their distinctive cast. In-
dividualism sees each person as the equal
of every other. A society is to be judged on
how well it serves the needs and interests of
the individuals making it up. Individuals
have claims as to life, liberty, property, and
the pursuit of happiness which involve not
mere wishes but fundamental rights. No
institution which thwarts these rights can
be legitimate. These are the central tenants
of the American public philosophy of lib-
eral individualism. It is a moral system
first, and only secondarily a political one.

As Luntz recognizes, the data show no
weakening of American individualism nor
any substantial change in its fabric. We
continue to believe that individuals should
be judged on what they do, that their perfor-
maance should determine the extent of their
rewards, and that great inequalities of result
are thus to be countenanced. We believe
that proper recognition of the individual
requires that his right to private property be
vigorously sustained.

While there is a large place for gov-
ernment, excessive or unchecked govern-
ment is a great threat to individual liberty
and prosperity. From this we continue to
support a constitutional system which en-
velopes the modern state in an elaborate
system of checks and balances and sepa-
rated powers. We continue to stand out in
the family of industrial nations by our re-
lative reluctance to use the state for social
welfare purposes, and by our belief in the
efficacy of individual action.2

It might be, of course, that even if
these fundamental beliefs are unchanging,
we have lost confidence in their efficacy.
The American ideology posits a system of
moral legitimacy—but it also implies a
practical faith that a society so constituted
can succeed and indeed surpass any rival.
With much of the world now embracing
large elements of what historically was
America's great idea—that markets work
economically and democracy works politi-
cally—it would be ironic indeed if we were
now losing confidence in these ideas.

Here again, though, a mountain of
recent survey data indicate that we retain
confidence that the system works. When
various survey organizations have asked
whether in reality people get ahead through
luck, or who they know, or whether their
success is determined by their own efforts,
large majorities say the latter. Similarly,
we continue to affirm the belief that we
really can get ahead through hard work. We
express satisfaction with our jobs, our fam-
ily life, our standard of living. Most of us
continue to say that we have achieved more
or less the place we deserve, given our
efforts and abilities.

Dissatisfactions

Now, there can be no doubt that many
Americans are dissatisfied with aspects of
current national performance. We should
be. But are we more dissatisfied now than
in times past? I have reviewed data bearing
on this elsewhere.3 Overall, I concluded,
there is no empirical base for suggesting
that levels of dissatisfaction in the aggre-
gate are now unusually high.

The patterns and objects of dissatis-
faction shift over time. The growth of the
industrial system in the late 19th and early
20th centuries prompted a host of new
problems, for example, and spawned move-
ments different from those which existed in
earlier eras. From the agricultural protests
of the Populists, through to the 20th century
reform efforts of the Progressives and the
New Deal, industrial-era dissatisfactions
encouraged new responses by government and other institutions of the society.

Today, large numbers of Americans are dissatisfied with important aspects of governmental performance—to an extent greater than we encountered at any point from the 1930s on into the 1970s. We shouldn’t minimize this level of dissatisfaction or the need for constructive responses to it. But nothing here suggests a decline in either the legitimacy of the nation’s founding ideas or in their perceived practical utility.

The Gap Between Personal and National Assessments

Survey data of the last 20 years do indicate a large discrepancy between our sense of how things are going in areas we can personally observe, and in the country at large. Frank Luntz refers to a number of such cases and provides a striking new illustration—by asking the familiar “right direction/wrong track” question not only with regard to the country, but as well to one’s own state, community, and personal life. The proportion saying that things have gotten off on the wrong track drops precipitously as one moves from the most distant object to that which is closest (p. 13).

But why is this disjunction so large, and what significance, if any, should we attach to it? One hypothesis, which Luntz entertains, is that national shortcomings are uniquely severe at the present time. But other hypotheses vie for consideration—for example, that contemporary mass communications immerses the public to an unprecedented extent in failure stories involving the economy, schools, crime, you name it. We don’t buy the entire picture, but we are influenced by it and thus moved toward a more pessimistic outlook. In areas we know through direct personal experience, however, the media presentation of the global picture is essentially irrelevant. And, if we are indeed fairly satisfied by what we see, this comes through unfiltered.

This second hypothesis says, then, that the disjunction doesn’t result from a collapse of national institutions and confidence. Rather, it’s a byproduct of an age of pervasive electronic communication which serves to give unprecedented circulation to problems (“exciting,” if distressing) rather than to successes or normal satisfactory performance (“dull and prosaic,” if comforting).

If the alternate hypothesis is more or less correct, the end product should be a society somewhat more anxious about its status than it otherwise might be but hardly prepared to give up on its founding hopes and ideals. This is, in fact, almost exactly what survey research over the last two decades has found.

Nostalgia

Burns Roper likes to remark that “they don’t make them like they used to—and they never did.” Surveys keep showing a widespread sense that important values are in jeopardy. Thus, the “work ethic” is in decline, moral life was more vital in the past than at present, and so on.4

It’s easy to make light of this value nostalgia, but it rests on an entirely sound foundation. Yesterday’s problems really don’t matter much to us—it’s today’s which matter. Various values are in greater jeopardy now than in the past, because it is only in the present that they are in jeopardy at all.

Excessive Personal Expectations?

Luntz also argues that the confidence which traditionally underlay the American Dream is being eroded by excessively high personal expectations. He cites surveys by the Roper Organization as providing data on a spiralling of personal expectations beyond manageable proportions. Roper has asked a set of three questions: “Thinking about the needs of you and your family, how much income per year would you say you and your family need to live in reasonable comfort?” That is followed by a parallel item on how much you would need “just to get by,” and by a third on how much would be required “to fulfill all your dreams.” Over the latter half of the 1980s, there was a large increase in the median figure given on the latter.

What we really need to look at, though, is the absolute values of the responses. The median income cited as to what is needed to live in reasonable comfort was $35,500 in the 1993 survey—about the national median family income that year and hardly a princely sum. On what it would take just to get by, the median figure given was $23,700—again, hardly unrealistic. And on what would be needed financially to fulfill all economic dreams, the 1993 median response was $100,300. Surely this isn’t wildly excessive given the wealth and capacities of the contemporary United States. The Roper findings in fact show how modest the public’s expectations are.

The American Dream is alive and well. More precisely, the American ideology is fundamentally strong, and continues to show in the present era the resilience it has over the past two centuries. Americans worry about deficiencies in their performance, as they should, but the great majority of them show no fundamental loss of confidence in either the moral worth of their society’s fundamental organization or its capacity to help them achieve—as much as any can—the best possible earthly life.

Endnotes:
2Alexis de Tocqueville made prescient reference to the latter in Democracy in America, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), Vol. 1, pp. 191-2: “There is no end which the human will despair of attaining through the combined power of individuals united into a society.”
4Ibid.