

# 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” profoundly threatens the entire fabric of American nationality.

I disagree with Luntz and Dermer on whether it is in jeopardy. But before exploring this disagreement I should stress that I do not disagree at all with the argument that, should America’s defining ideology and its central assumptions in fact be eroding, that would be uniquely destructive. Many Americans, and many foreign visitors such as G.K. Chesterton, whom Luntz cites, have recognized the ideological 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 generations 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 economic decline so profound that it might erode the view of America as a successful society. Democratic candidates saw national hopes and expectations at risk in 1988 and 1992. Now at least one Republican 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 maintain a standard of living up to their parents’.

## Ideology Unchanging

I have examined much of the relevant survey data on the current status of American ideals elsewhere, including in a recently published monograph on *The American Ideology*.<sup>1</sup> At the core of this ideology is an extraordinary and far-reaching individualism, which pervades and shapes all of the other components of American values, giving them their distinctive cast. Individualism 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 liberal 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 performance 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 government, excessive or unchecked government is a great threat to individual liberty and prosperity. From this we continue to support a constitutional system which envelops the modern state in an elaborate system of checks and balances and separated powers. We continue to stand out in the family of industrial nations by our relative reluctance to use the state for social welfare purposes, and by our belief in the efficacy of individual action.<sup>2</sup>

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 politically—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 family 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.<sup>3</sup> Overall, I concluded, there is no empirical base for suggesting that levels of dissatisfaction *in the aggregate* are now unusually high.

The patterns and objects of dissatisfaction 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 movements 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 disjuncture 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 disjuncture 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 me-

dian 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:

<sup>1</sup>Everett C. Ladd, *The American Ideology: An Exploration of the Origins, Meaning, and Role of American Political Ideas*, A Roper Center Monograph (Storrs, CT: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1994). See also by Ladd: “Participating Citizens in the Individualistic Society,” *Public Perspective*, (March/April 1994), pp. 13-15; *Change and Continuity in American Values in the 90s* (Sarasota, Institute for Public Relations Research, 1993); “Thinking About America,” *Public Perspective*, (July/August 1993), pp. 19-21; “Why Are So Many People So Pessimistic in So Many Countries?” *Public Perspective*, (March/April 1993), p. 29; “Who Says Americans are ‘Mad as Hell’?” *Public Perspective*, (July/August 1992), pp. 6-7; “Big Swings in the National Mood are a Staple of Contemporary Politics,” *Public Perspective*, (January/February 1992), pp. 3-5; “Attitudes Toward Government: What the Public Says,” *Government Executive*, (January 1988), pp. 11-16.

<sup>2</sup>Alexis 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 despairs of attaining through the combined power of individuals united into a society.”

<sup>3</sup>Everett C. Ladd, “The Myth of Moral Decline,” *The Responsive Community*, (Winter 1993/94), pp. 52-68.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*