

A Farewell to the American Dream?

By Frank Luntz and Ron Dermer

In 1921, after visiting the US, the English philosopher G.K. Chesterton observed that "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed." This statement should be self-evident. How else would such a religiously, ethnically, and culturally diverse people be unified if not through a common creed?

From the birth of our country until today, a creed that represents our shared philosophy has held sway making America exceptional among nations. It is a creed based on the primacy of the *individual* in society. Due to its inherent nature, this individualism could engender only one political structure, a democracy where all individuals are given a say. Similarly, there could only be one economic system, capitalism, wherein individual opportunity is maximized. Perhaps most important historically was the ratification of the Constitution, limiting the powers of government through checks and balances and protecting and empowering the individual through the Bill of Rights.

Today, Americans are still firm in their prioritization of individual freedom and choice, and are decidedly anti-statist compared to their foreign counterparts. For instance, Americans are more than three times as likely as West Europeans to *disagree* with the statement that "the state/government should guarantee every citizen food and basic shelter."¹ Similarly, West Europeans are twice as likely as Americans to believe that "it is the responsibility of the state to take care of very poor people who can't take care of themselves."² It is not that Americans are less caring than those in other countries. Rather, they value personal responsibility more than do their counterparts elsewhere.

The protection of individual choice is thus a prime value. The current health care debate provides further evidence of the importance of choice in American society. When presented with an option of an "inexpensive health care program that does not allow you to choose your own doctor," or an "expensive health care program that allows you to choose your own doctor,"

58% pick the latter while only 32% choose the former.³

In his *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Toqueville saw this individualism as the cornerstone of our society. To Toqueville, individualism manifested both our strengths and weaknesses. He pointed out that, somewhat paradoxically, this individualism was in fact the source of our collective spirit. "There is no end to which the human will despairs of attaining through the *combined* power of *individuals* united into a society."⁴

Today, over a century and a half later, we still are a nation of individuals bound by

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a common creed. It is for precisely this reason that political institutions in America are so much more important than they are in other nations. We simply do not have the homogeneity to fall back on, whether in the form of religion, ethnicity or culture, should the belief in our creed dissipate. Foreigners who recognize this fact are apt to understand and appreciate America's special attachment to the sanctity of its national symbols and institutions, which represent a unified and shared vision of an otherwise diverse nation.

The American Dream

The "American Dream" is an obvious manifestation of our shared philosophy. It is a *shared* ideal that is uniquely defined by each American.

My focus group research on this subject, at first glance, suggests diversity of responses. For some participants, "The Dream" represents "the opportunity to rise from a sales clerk to president of the company." Others envision "having a family,

owning a home and two cars, being able to afford an annual vacation and retire comfortably." Still others may simply desire "the freedom to practice [their] religion as [they] see fit."⁵ Nevertheless, each individual's description of his or her own American Dream is only a part of a grander ideal—the fundamental belief in the freedom and opportunity of the individual.

The Individual/Collective Disconnect

It is important to appreciate the symbiosis between our individual and collective visions. The two feed and nurture each other. If one dies, so does the other. Unfortunately, in the last 30 years we have witnessed the fraying of this essential bond. The sense that Americans have of their country's prospects has increasingly diverged from their sense of the direction of their own lives. In fact, polls consistently show that attitudes improve as they become more and more "personalized." A survey that my firm recently conducted demonstrates this divergence beyond any reasonable doubt. As the graph on page 13 illustrates, the number of people saying that things are "seriously off on the wrong track" increases dramatically as the question moves from the respondent's personal life to his community, state and country.⁶

Similarly, a poll I conducted for Merrill Lynch showed that 86% of Baby Boomers thought future retirees would face a financial crisis while less than half (42%) thought that they personally would face such a crisis.⁷ And, though many Boomers express frustration with declining morality, disintegrating families, and deteriorating quality of life, roughly nine in ten of them indicate satisfaction with their own lives.⁸

The disparity in judgments about national directions and one's own position is made wider not only by falling national expectations, but by rising personal ones. As one of my recent focus group participants put it, "The American Dream is being able to have what you want, not just what you need."⁹ The problem is that yesterday's luxuries become today's necessities. Air-conditioning, dishwashers, microwaves,

etc., have all seen marked increases over the last couple of decades in the percentage of people classifying them as “necessities.” Our research shows that 34% of Americans claim that they “need more material things than their parents did at a similar age,” and that 50% “want more material things than their parents did.”¹⁰ Furthermore, we have redefined what we consider “the good life,” a notion which today is more likely to include such things as a college education, a high paying job, etc., than it was in the past.¹¹

The effect of these trends is no more obvious than in the response to the annually tracked question, “How much income per year would you need to fulfill all your dreams?” The median response skyrocketed by over 50% in the late 1980s (though it has since leveled off).¹² The effect of heightened personal expectations coupled with declining national expectations is disastrous—individuals having bigger and bigger dreams while living in a society that they *perceive* as increasingly unlikely to fulfill them, both materially and spiritually. In fact, the number of people saying that they think they have a “very good” chance of achieving the good life has declined by over one-third since 1975.¹³

Why Today is Different

Some may correctly point out that this is not our country’s first encounter with pessimism. There have been numerous times when our citizenry thought that the next year would bring “worse times” (usually during recessions). Today’s pessimistic mood is different, however, because it is compounded by a second phenomenon—a pervasive cynicism across the body politic. In a span of only thirty years we have witnessed an erosion of confidence in our institutions that has, I believe, finally taken its toll on the long-term national mind-set.

In 1964, three-fourths (76%) of Americans thought that “Washington can be trusted to do what is right” all or most of the

time. Today, less than one-fourth (24%) share that view.¹⁴ In the Baby Boomer survey, a remarkable 87% of respondents thought that the government had made financial promises to them that it could not keep.¹⁵ Government is not the only recipient of this growing public mistrust—many other institutions are afflicted too.

Now the picture crystallizes. Granted, Americans have been pessimistic before, but these periods were short-lived. Good times brought good spirits in their wake, and confidence in the future was restored and renewed. Now, though, when the

see the American Dream in spiritual terms see the moral decay of a nation besieged by crime and violence. To them, the American Dream is dying along with our nation’s spirit. Values such as support for community and personal responsibility, once so cherished, seem abandoned. Institutions such as the family, church and school that had nurtured the American Dream for two centuries have been weakened.

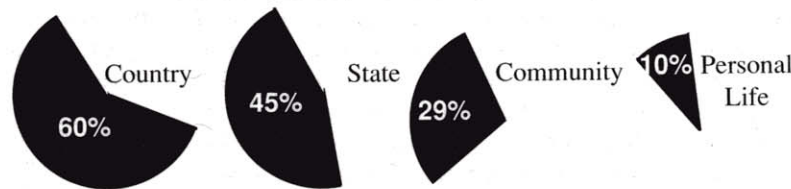
While these two groups see the American Dream through different lenses, they have one thing in common; their belief that the American Dream is slowly dying, and that something must be done to restore it now before it is too late. But with confidence in our central institutions at an all-time low, to whom can we now turn? It’s no wonder that the idea of accepting greater personal responsibility now occupies center stage in the political debate.

Given this confluence of developments, we are witnessing a new phenomenon—a profound long-term pessimism. While assessments of current conditions are generally positive, expectations for the future are decidedly negative.¹⁶ What is most startling, is that a fifth (21%) of Baby Boomers now say that the American Dream is dead.¹⁷ An “intergenerational” pessimism has taken root. In our recent poll of Baby Boomers (conducted amidst glowing economic reports) a remarkable 61% thought that the next generation’s standard of living would be worse than what they now enjoy.¹⁸ I have searched for past data that would suggest such a pessimistic intergenerational outlook, and I have not yet been able to find any.

What can be done?

There are two possible ways that personal and national perceptions can be brought into line: We can lower our personal expectations, or raise our national expectations. The first of these would destroy the American Dream; the latter in contrast would restore and renew it.

Sense of Being on the “Wrong Track” Drops Sharply as the Reference Becomes More Immediate, and then Personal



Question: Generally speaking, would you say today things in the country [state...] are going in the right direction, or have they pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track? **Note:** Percentages shown are for “wrong track” only.

Source: Survey by The Frank Luntz Research Companies, August 1994.

chairman of the Federal Reserve system declares that this economy is the healthiest it has been in many years, and a stream of positive economic reports supports his claim, the public mood remains profoundly pessimistic.

The lack of confidence that we have in our institutions has left us bereft of hope of finding solutions to what ails us. Although our individual moods may be buoyed up temporarily by good news, our long-term outlook remains depressed. While many of us may still hope that our personal dreams will be fulfilled, the collective vision for America is eroding.

Many of those who define the American Dream in economic terms blame government for its demise. According to this view, wasteful federal spending, excessive taxation, and a mounting federal deficit and national debt have left a yoke around the necks of future generations, impeding their ability to achieve their dream. Those who

This country is still firm in its belief in an opportunity society based on hard work, risk, and reward. Americans are far more likely than citizens of other western nations to disagree with the statement "hard work offers little guarantee of success."¹⁹ Similarly, the two traits that Americans say are the most important in determining where you go in life are ambition and hard work.²⁰

There really is no such thing as a British Dream, a German Dream or French Dream. The people of these countries do not share our individualistic creed. One can't ask Americans to stop dreaming, for it is the belief in individual opportunity and unlimited achievement that binds us as a nation. Severing that link would destroy what America is all about.

But if lowering individual sights is not the answer, how can we go about raising our judgment and expectations about national performance? Since we have a free press in this country that by its very nature tends to exaggerate our vices, we cannot expect help in this area from the media.

The best approach appears to be to ride a wave that is slowly sweeping the nation—the move towards more direct democracy and the defederalization of government. Critics may be right in arguing that proposals like term limits, voter recall, and national initiatives will likely do little to improve the actual efficacy of government. But the *perception* of government (which is where much of our problem rests) and its accountability will be greatly enhanced.

In a similar vein, we must bring the decision-making framework for national issues as close to home as possible. Not only will the solutions be more efficient, but the American people will feel that they are once again masters of their own fate. National issues will start becoming local issues, which, in most cases, is what they truly are (e.g., the cases of crime, welfare, and education). But individuals would now be more optimistic about their ability to solve "widespread" problems. By giving individuals more control of the process, we can improve confidence in the system.

Conclusion

Throughout our history, we have dreamed of a better tomorrow, confident that we could face the challenges that lie before us. Americans, as individuals and as a nation are preoccupied with being the best. But our confidence that our nation, is the best has waned considerably. The 25th anniversary of the landing on the moon comes at a time of national introspection. When Baby Boomers were asked which nation would be the leading economic power in twenty years, only half (51%) chose America—only half.²¹ In a survey of Ivy League students, ostensibly America's brightest, if not best, just 54% answered "America" to the same question.²²

Furthermore, the perception of American exceptionalism is slowly being replaced with a more relativist position. In 1955, when presented with a choice of "the US is the greatest country in the world, better than all other countries in every possible way," or "the US is a great country, but so are certain other countries," or "other countries are better than the US," 66% of Americans chose the first statement, 31% the second and 1% the third. By 1991 a remarkable change had transpired, with only 37% saying that the US was the "greatest country in the world," and 9% claiming that "other countries are better."²³

Those who think that this is a positive development should revisit Chesterton's dictum. A diverse population founded on a creed demands an exceptionalist mentality. It is important to distinguish between the belief in a kind of philosophical supremacy and that of individual or group supremacy. Our creed is a refutation of the belief that one individual or group is superior to another. It does insist on the supremacy of the individual. As such, the creed is profoundly inclusionary and has held our diverse nation together. It's essential not only that this creed continues to hold, but that we see it as standing for the best the world has to offer.

We are a nation of dreamers because we are a nation born from a dream. Thomas Jefferson once said, "Where there is no

vision, the people perish." If the American Dream dies, so too will the dreams of all its citizens. For a nation entrusted with the mantle of human progress, this would be a sad fate indeed.

Endnotes

¹Surveys by Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) for the Times Mirror Company, Spring 1991.

²Ibid.

³Survey by ABC News, September 16-19, 1993.

⁴Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), Vol. I, p. 198.

⁵"Saving the American Dream" Focus Groups by Luntz Research (Hartford, Atlanta, Des Moines, Los Angeles), January 1994.

⁶Luntz Research Survey on the American Dream, August, 1994.

⁷"Saving the American Dream Survey" Panelback Survey by Luntz Research for Merrill Lynch, November 1993.

⁸"Saving the American Dream Survey" Benchmark Survey by Luntz Research for Merrill Lynch, August 1993.

⁹Focus group of Independent/Swing Voters in Chicago by Luntz Research, June 1994.

¹⁰Luntz Research Survey on the American Dream, August, 1994.

¹¹Surveys by the Roper Organization, latest that of December 1991.

¹²Surveys by the Roper Organization, latest that of April 1993.

¹³Surveys by the Roper Organization, latest that of December 1991.

¹⁴University of Michigan, National Election Study (NES), 1964 and 1992.

¹⁵"Saving the American Dream" Panelback Survey by Luntz Research, November 1993.

¹⁶University of Michigan Index of Consumer Sentiment, June 1993 to June 1994.

¹⁷"Saving the American Dream" Benchmark Survey by Luntz Research, August 1993.

¹⁸"Saving the American Dream" Panelback Survey by Luntz Research for Merrill Lynch, November 1993.

¹⁹Survey by PSRA for the Times Mirror Company, May 1990.

²⁰Survey by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), International Social Survey Program (ISPP), February-April 1992.

²¹"Saving the American Dream" Benchmark Survey by Luntz Research, August 1993.

²²Ivy League Survey, Luntz Weber Research, January 1993.

²³Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of May 1991.

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