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THE WORD AMERICAN ENDS IN "CAN": THE AMBIGUOUS PROMISE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

JENNIFER L. HOCHSCHILD*

I. INTRODUCTION

"[I]n the beginning," wrote John Locke, "all the world was *America*."¹ Locke was referring specifically to the absence of a cash nexus in primitive society, but the sentence evokes the unsullied newness, infinite possibility, limitless resources that are commonly understood to be the essence of "the American Dream." The idea of the American dream has attached to everything from religious freedom to a home in the suburbs, and it has inspired emotions ranging from deep satisfaction to disillusioned fury. Nevertheless, the phrase elicits for most Americans some variant of Locke's fantasy—a new world where anything can happen and good things might.

Millions of immigrants moved to America, and internal migrants moved around within it, in order to fulfill their version of the American dream.² By objective measures and their own accounts, many came astonishingly close to success.³ Just as many were probably defeated and disillusioned.⁴ My purpose in the larger

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1. JOHN LOCKE, *SECOND TREATISE OF GOVERNMENT* 29 (Thomas P. Peandon ed., 1952).

2. See, e.g., Immigration Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-649, § 101, 104 Stat. 4978, 4981-82 (1990) (codified at 8 U.S.C. § 1151 (Supp. II 1990)) (limiting the number of legal immigrants to 700,000 for the years 1992-1994 and to 675,000 thereafter).

3. For example, Andrew Carnegie, who immigrated to America from Scotland in 1848, became a millionaire and patron of the Arts. See BURTON J. HENDRICK, *THE LIFE OF ANDREW CARNEGIE* (1932).

4. See generally UPTON SINCLAIR, *THE JUNGLE* (1906) (telling the story of downtrodden immigrants); George C. Haring, *America and Vietnam: The Unending War*, *FOREIGN AFFAIRS* 104 (Winter 1991) (noting that many Vietnamese immigrants remain unassimilated and live below the poverty line).

project of which this Article forms a part is to examine what the American dream has done for and meant to one group of migrants, most of whom did not come to America to fulfill their dreams. That group is black Americans, especially since the 1960s. What feeling does "the American dream" evoke among blacks in the United States? For whom has it been fulfilled and why? What are the effects of its fulfillment and failure, both for blacks and for other Americans? How does the recent experience of African Americans compare with the experiences of other Americans conventionally categorized by race or ethnicity? What, finally, do these experiences tell us more generally about the social, political, and philosophical consequences of the dominant American political ideology?

This Article does not address these questions; I include them to give readers a sense of the context within which I developed the analytic arguments I herein describe. The American dream is, however, an ideology whose power extends far beyond my particular interests in race. It has been Americans' dominant ideology at least since the early nineteenth century. Americans' beliefs about happiness, freedom, personal and social responsibility, and equality can all be understood in the context of the American dream, and perhaps only in that context. Opponents, embittered former believers, and boosters alike all shape their assumptions and actions in response, one way or another, to the enticing promise of the dream.

In this Article I will provide an extended definition of the American dream and discuss its virtues and drawbacks as a dominant ideology. I will conclude by drawing implications for the ideal and practice of equality, American style.

II. THE MEANING OF SUCCESS

What is the American dream? It consists of tenets about achieving success. Let us first explore the meaning of "success," and then consider the rules for achieving it.

President Ronald Reagan stated, "[W]hat I want to see above all is that this country remains a country where someone can always get rich. That's the thing that we have and that must be pre-

served.”⁵ Most people agree with President Reagan that success means a high income, a prestigious job, and economic security. My treatment is no exception. *Pace* the President, however, material well-being is only one form of accomplishment. People seek success in arenas ranging from the pulpit to the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House, from membership in the newest and hottest dance club to membership in the Senate. Indeed, if we believe oral histories, people define success as “a right to say what they wanta say, do what they wanta do, and fashion a world into something that can be great for everyone”⁶ as often as they think of it in terms of wealth and status.

Different kinds of success need not, but often do, conflict. A classic plot of American family sagas is the children’s rejection of the parents’ hard-won wealth and social standing in favor of some “deeper,” more meaningful form of accomplishment.⁷ The conflict need not be intergenerational, however, and the rejection may work in reverse, as Cotton Mather sadly reported:

There have been very fine settlements in the north-east regions; but what is become of them? I have heard that one of our ministers once preaching to a congregation there, urged them to approve themselves a religious people from this consideration, “that otherwise they would contradict the main end of planting this wilderness;” whereupon a well-known person, then in the assembly, cried out, “Sir, you are mistaken: you think you are preaching to the people at the [Plymouth] Bay; our main end was to catch fish.”⁸

Mather “wished, that something more excellent had been the main end of the settlements in that brave country,”⁹ but the ideology of

5. President’s News Conference, 19 WEEKLY COMP. PRES. DOC. 938, 943 (June 28, 1983).

6. STUDES TERKEL, *AMERICAN DREAMS: LOST AND FOUND* 236 (1980) (quoting Ed Sadlowski, son of Polish immigrants who became the youngest district director of the United Steel Workers of America).

7. For two recent examples, see DAVID CHANDLER & MARY CHANDLER, *THE BINGHAMS OF LOUISVILLE* (1987) and ADAM HOCHSCHILD, *HALF THE WAY HOME: A MEMOIR OF FATHER AND SON* (1987).

8. COTTON MATHER, *MAGNALIA CHRISTI AMERICANA* 27 (Raymond J. Cunningham ed., Frederick Ungar 1970) (1702).

9. *Id.* at 27-28.

the American dream itself remains agnostic as to the definition of "excellent."

Success can be measured in at least three ways, each of which results in profoundly different normative and behavioral consequences. First, success can be absolute. In this case, achieving the American dream implies reaching some threshold of well-being, perhaps higher than where one began but not necessarily dazzling. One of the first American civil engineers thus explained westward migration: "Every man will endeavor to improve his circumstances by a change of occupation or by a change of place. He fixes a standard mark of enjoyments by comparison of his present situation with what the new and unpeopled district holds out to him."¹⁰ Rock star Bruce Springsteen provided a more recent instance: "I don't think the American dream was that everybody was going to make . . . a billion dollars, but it was that everybody was going to have an opportunity and the chance to live a life with some decency and some dignity and a chance for some self-respect."¹¹

In the ideology of the American dream, absolute success is in principle equally available to everyone, although guaranteed to no one. As Bruce Springsteen continued, "I dreamed something and I was lucky. A large part of it came true. But it's not just for one; it's gotta be for everyone, and you've gotta fight for it every day."¹² To the degree that a society makes it possible for most people to become better off—to achieve absolute success, in my terms—the society is structured to promote equality of results without any hint of identity of results.¹³

Second, success can be relative. By this measurement the American dream means becoming better off than some point of comparison. That point may be one's own childhood, people in the old country, one's neighbors, a character from a book, another race or gender—anything or anyone that one chooses to measure oneself against. Relative success implies no threshold of well-being, and may or may not entail continually changing the comparison group

10. LOAMMI BALDWIN, *THOUGHTS ON A STUDY OF POLITICAL ECONOMY* 15 (1809), *quoted in* STANLEY LEBERGOTT, *THE AMERICANS: AN ECONOMIC RECORD* 85 (1984).

11. DAVE MARSH, *GLORY DAYS: BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN IN THE 1980s* 264 (1984).

12. *Id.*

13. In an earlier work, my coauthors and I analyzed this concept in terms of "person-regarding" and "lot-regarding" equality. *See* DOUGLAS RAE ET AL., *EQUALITIES* 82-103 (1981).

as one achieves a given level of accomplishment. Writer James Comer captured a benign version of relative success in his depiction of a "kind of competition . . . we had . . . going on" with "the closest friends that we had":¹⁴

When we first met them, we had a dining room and they didn't. They went back and they turned one of their bedrooms into a dining room After that we bought this big Buick car. And we came to their house and they had bought another car. She bought a fur coat one year and your dad bought me one the next. But it was a friendly thing, the way we raced. It gave you something to work for, to look forward to. Every year we tried to have something different to show them what we had done, and they would have something to show us.¹⁵

In 1736, William Byrd II articulated a more malign version: slaves "blow up the pride, and ruin the industry of our white people, who seeing a rank of poor creatures below them, detest work for fear it should make them look like slaves."¹⁶

As Byrd suggested, relative success implies a rather different understanding of equality than does absolute success. It contains no hint of equality of outcomes; rather, it calls for, at most, equal chances to do better than some standard. It implies, in short, a "soft" form of equal opportunity.

A third form of success is competitive. Success in this context consists, not of reaching a threshold or doing better than some standard, but of achieving victory over someone else. My success implies at the least your lack of success, and at the most your failure. One's competitors are usually people, whether known and concrete, as opponents in a tennis match, or unknown and abstract, as all other applicants for a job. *U.S. News and World Report*, in an

14. JAMES P. COMER, *MAGGIE'S AMERICAN DREAM: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A BLACK FAMILY* 83-85 (1988). James Comer is an African American raised in poverty in Barbour County, Indiana, who became a medical doctor. His book recaptures the life and dreams of his mother, Maggie Comer.

15. *Id.*

16. Letter from William Byrd II to Lord Egmont (July 12, 1736), in 1 *AM. HIST. REV.* 88-90 (1895), quoted in Michael Greenberg, *William Byrd II and the World of the Market*, 16 *S. STUD.* 454, 454 (1977).

article celebrating success,¹⁷ pictured a businessman with flying tie and bulging briefcase striding over four prone colleagues, with the caption, "Like it or not, success often means stepping over others."¹⁸ One's opponent may, however, be entirely impersonal—a hurricane, a disease, or a mountain. John Henry, "the steel-drivin' man,"¹⁹ is famed for beating a machine, and Paul Bunyan for taming the primeval forest.²⁰

If competitive success implies any form of equality at all, it is a "hard" form of equal opportunity. William Graham Sumner laid out the harsh glory of a world in which success—and failure—are absolute and, in some sense, equally accessible to all:

Competition . . . is a law of nature. Nature is entirely neutral; she submits to him who most energetically and resolutely assails her. She grants her rewards to the fittest, therefore, without regard to other considerations of any kind. If, then, there be liberty, men get from her just in proportion to their works. . . . [W]e cannot go outside of this alternative: liberty, inequality, survival of the fittest; not-liberty, equality, survival of the unfittest. The former carries society forward and favors all its best members; the latter carries society downwards and favors all its worst members.²¹

Nature is indifferent among people (among men, to Sumner) and we have an equal right and responsibility to assail her. Beyond that starting point, equality—and even worse, efforts to equalize—cannot be justified.

III. RULES FOR ACHIEVING SUCCESS

Success can be material, spiritual, or otherwise; it may be available to all or a few. One person's success may enable the success of others or come at their expense. How is it to be sought, and achieved? The bundle of commonly understood, even uncon-

17. Lawrence D. Maloney, *SUCCESS! The Chase Is Back In Style Again*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Oct. 3, 1983, at 60.

18. *Id.*

19. GUY B. JOHNSON, *JOHN HENRY* 27-44 (1929).

20. JAMES STEVENS, *PAUL BUNYAN* 45-46 (1925).

21. WILLIAM G. SUMNER, *THE CHALLENGE OF FACTS AND OTHER ESSAYS* 25 (1914).

sciously assumed, tenets about achieving success are what make up the ideology of the American dream.

As I construct it, the ideology has four related but distinct premises. They answer the questions: *Who* may pursue the American dream? In *what* does the pursuit consist? *How* does one successfully pursue the dream? And *why* is the pursuit worthy of our deepest commitment? The answer to "who" in the standard ideology is "everyone, regardless of ascriptive traits, family background, or personal history." The answer to "what" is "the reasonable anticipation, though not the promise, of success, however it is defined." The answer to "how" is "through actions and traits under one's own control." The answer to "why" is "true success is associated with virtue." Let us consider each rule in turn.

The first tenet, that all people may always pursue their dreams, is the most direct connotation of Locke's statement that "in the beginning, all the world was *America*."²² The idea extends, however, beyond the image of a pristine state of nature waiting for whoever "discovers" it. Even in the distinctly nonpristine, non-natural world of Harlem or Harlan County,²³ anyone can pursue a dream. A century ago, one moved to the frontier to hide a spotted past and begin afresh. For example, as one woman from that period stated, Montana frontierswomen "never ask[ed] women where they [had] come from or what they did before they came to live in our neck of the woods. If they wore a wedding band and were good wives, mothers, and neighbors that was enough for us to know."²⁴ Today one appeals to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to overturn racial, gender, or age discrimination.²⁵ In effect, Americans believe that they can create in their own lives a

22. See LOCKE, *supra* note 1, at 29.

23. Harlan County is an extremely poor coal mining community located in the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky.

24. JULIE R. JEFFREY, *FRONTIER WOMEN: THE TRANS-MISSISSIPPI WEST 1840-1880*, at 141 (1979).

25. See, e.g., *Blue Bell Boots, Inc. v EEOC*, 418 F.2d 355 (6th Cir. 1969) (holding that the EEOC, in a racial discrimination suit, may demand access to all information relevant to the investigation and may consider employment practices, other than those being investigated, in framing a remedy).

mini-state of nature that will allow them to slough off the past and invent a better future.²⁶

The second tenet, that one may reasonably anticipate success, suggests a more guarded promise. After all, "reasonable anticipation" is far from a guarantee, as all children on the morning of their birthdays know. Reasonable anticipation, however, is also much more than simply longing; most children are not silly or crazy to expect at least some of what they wish for on their birthdays. On a larger scale, from its inception America's dominant image has been that of an upcoming birthday party:

Seagull: A whole countrie of English is there, man, . . . and . . . the Indians are so in love with 'hem that all the treasure they have they lay at their feete

Seagull: [G]olde is more plentiful there than copper is with us. . . . Why, man, all their dripping pans and their chamberpots are pure golde; and all the chaines with which they chaine up their streets are massie golde; all the prisoners they take are fettered in golde; and for rubies and diamonds they goe forthe on holy dayes and gather 'hem by the sea shore to hang on their childrens coats²⁷

Presumably, few Britons, even in 1605, took this message literally, but the idea that riches—whether material, spiritual, or otherwise—abound in America persists inside as well as outside its borders.

The third premise, for those who do not take Seagull literally, explains how one is to achieve the success that one anticipates. Ralph Waldo Emerson is uncharacteristically succinct on the

26. Characteristically, Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* comic strip simultaneously evokes and mocks the dream of starting afresh: Uncle Duke, standing before a sign reading "Hasta la vista, Commandante," says tearfully,

You know, when I first came to Miami, I was just another former National Guardsman down on his luck But now, after eight years of freedom fighting, I've got a nice retirement condo in Key Biscayne and a \$7 million nest egg in a Cayman bank! Is this a great country or what? *God*, I love America! I feel so. . . so lucky to have been given a . . . a fresh. . . . Forgive me. I promised myself I wasn't going to get emotional here. . . .

His audience responds, "It's okay, big guy! We love ya!" *WASH. POST*, Mar. 31, 1988, at D3.

27. BEN JONSON ET AL., *EASTWARD HO!* 71-72 (London 1605), quoted in Richard Beeman, *Labor Forces and Race Relations: A Comparative View of the Colonization of Brazil and Virginia*, 86 *POL. SCI. Q.* 609, 618-19 (1971).

point: "There is always a reason, *in the man*, for his good or bad fortune, and so in making money."²⁸ Other nineteenth-century orators exhorted young men:

Behold him [a statue of Benjamin Franklin] . . . holding out to you an example of diligence, economy and virtue, and personifying the triumphant success which may await those who follow it! Behold him, ye that are humblest and poorest . . . lift up your heads and look at the image of a man who rose from nothing, who owed nothing to parentage or patronage, who enjoyed no advantages of early education which are not open,—a hundred-fold open,—to yourselves, who performed the most menial services in the business in which his early life was employed, but who lived to stand before Kings, and died to leave a name which the world will never forget.²⁹

Lest we smile at the quaint optimism, or crude propaganda, of our ancestors, consider a recent advertisement from Citicorp Bank. It shows a carefully balanced group of shining faces—young and old, male and female, black, Latino, WASP, and Asian—all gazing starry-eyed at the middle distance over the words:

FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA, THE WILL TO SUCCEED IS PART OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT. The instant you become an American, whether by birth or by choice, you are guaranteed . . . the freedom to succeed. You are free to dream your own dream of success, to study, to work, to create and discover and build, for yourself and your children, the success you want.³⁰

28. RALPH W. EMERSON, *Wealth*, in *THE CONDUCT OF LIFE* 71, 86 (Boston, Ticknor and Fields 1860).

29. ROBERT C. WINTHROP, *ORATION AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE STATUE OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN* 25 (1856), *quoted in* IRVIN G. WYLLIE, *THE SELF-MADE MAN IN AMERICA* 14-15 (1954). Benjamin Franklin's statement regarding this premise was more succinct: In America, "people do not inquire concerning a stranger *What is he?* but, *What can he do?*"⁹ BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America*, in *WORKS OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN* 432, 435 (John Bigelow ed., federal ed. 1904).

30. *Citicorp Advertisement*, *TIME*, Aug. 21, 1989, at 44-45.

If people still do not sufficiently realize that "I'M IN CHARGE OF ME," *Personal Growth and Action Training Workshop*, Advertising Flyer, July 1989 (on file with author), enterprising psychologists collect substantial fees by teaching them so in a "personal growth and action training workshop." *Id.* The rationale fits precisely into the model of Benjamin Franklin's statue: "It's all too easy to lose track of where we're going and how to get there. . . . This seminar will train participants in methods of finding out what they need and want, taking charge of their own lives, and restoring productivity." *Id.*

Implicit in this flow of oratory is the fourth tenet of the American dream, that the pursuit of success warrants so much fervor because it is associated with virtue. "Associated with" has at least four more precise meanings: virtue leads to success, success makes a person virtuous, success indicates virtue, or apparent success is not real success unless one is also virtuous. That quintessential American, Benjamin Franklin, illustrated three of these associations. First, his autobiography instructs us that "no Qualities were so likely to make a poor Man's Fortune as those of Probity & Integrity."³¹ Second and conversely, "Proverbial Sentences, chiefly such as inculcated Industry and Frugality"³² are included in *Poor Richard's Almanack* "as the Means of procuring Wealth and thereby securing Virtue, it being more difficult for a Man in Want to act always honestly, as . . . *it is hard for an empty Sack to stand upright.*"³³ Finally, mere wealth does not guarantee and may actually impede true success, the attainment of which requires a long list of virtues: "*Fond Pride of Dress, is sure a very Curse; E'er Fancy you consult, consult your Purse*";³⁴ "[A] *Ploughman on his Legs is higher than a Gentleman on his Knees*";³⁵ and "*Pride that dines on Vanity sups on Contempt . . .*"³⁶

If we consider these four premises of the American dream in light of the varying meanings of success described earlier, we can see the full richness—and seductiveness—of the ideology. Different understandings of success do not much affect the first tenet, the norm of universal participation and endless chances to start over. However, such understandings do affect the other three tenets.

If success is defined as achieving some absolute threshold of well-being, the ideology portrays America as a land of plenty, and Americans as "people of plenty."³⁷ Hard work and virtue, com-

31. BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, WRITINGS 1392 (J. A. Lemay ed., 1987). To avoid the temptation of believing that such naivete belonged only to our ancestors, we need merely consider a recent newspaper headline: "Honor, Family, Work: Success." Pat Dillon, *Honor, Family, Work: Success*, SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS, Mar. 29, 1988, at B1.

32. FRANKLIN, *supra* note 31, at 1392.

33. *Id.* at 1298-1302, 1397.

34. *Id.* at 1300.

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.*

37. DAVID M. POTTER, PEOPLE OF PLENTY: ECONOMIC ABUNDANCE AND THE AMERICAN CHARACTER (1954).

bined with plenty of apparently uninhabited land in the west, allow everyone to anticipate success even in the face of continued adversity. This is the great theme, of course, of one of the most powerful children's sagas ever written in America, the *Little House in the Big Woods* series. Many years of grasshopper plagues, ferocious blizzards, cheating, cowardly railroad bosses, and even hostile Indians cannot prevent Pa and his girls from eventually "winning their bet with Uncle Sam" and becoming prosperous homesteaders.³⁸ In the words of one of Pa's songs:

I am sure in this world there are plenty
Of good things enough for us all

. . . .

It's cowards alone that are crying
And foolishly saying, "I can't!"
It is only by plodding and striving
And laboring up the steep hill
Of life, that you'll ever be thriving,
Which you'll do if you've only the will.³⁹

If success is defined competitively, however, the ideology portrays a rather different America. Hard work and virtue combined with scarce resources produce winners who are successful and good, and losers who have failed and are bad. This is the theme of John Rockefeller's Sunday School address:

The growth of a large business . . . is merely a survival of the fittest The American Beauty rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working out of a law of nature and a law of God.⁴⁰

38. The *Little House* series, by Laura I. Wilder, consists of eight volumes: *LITTLE HOUSE IN THE BIG WOODS* (1932); *FARMER BOY* (1933); *THE LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE* (1935); *ON THE BANKS OF PLUM CREEK* (1937); *BY THE SHORES OF SILVER LAKE* (1939); *THE LONG WINTER* (1940), *LITTLE TOWN ON THE PRAIRIE* (1941); and *THESE HAPPY GOLDEN YEARS* (1943).

39. LAURA I. WILDER, *THE LONG WINTER* 334 (1940).

40. W.J. GHENT, *OUR BENEVOLENT FEUDALISM* 29 (1902) (quoting Rockefeller).

As the perennial popularity of the *Little House* series indicates,⁴¹ Americans prefer the self-image of universal achievement to the self-image of a few stalwarts triumphing over weaker contenders. More important than any single image is the enormous elasticity and range of the ideology of the American dream. People can encourage themselves with softer versions, congratulate themselves with harder ones, and exult with the hardest, as their circumstances and characters warrant.

Thus the American dream is in many ways an enormously successful ideology. It has for centuries lured people to America and moved them around within it, and has kept them striving in horrible conditions against impossible odds. Most Americans celebrate it unthinkingly, along with apple pie and motherhood; criticism typically is limited to marginal imperfections in its application. But like apple pie and motherhood, the American dream upon closer examination turns out to be less than perfect. Let us turn, then, to flaws intrinsic to the dream.

IV. DEFECTS IN THE AMERICAN DREAM

A. *The First Tenet: Equal Participation*

Each premise, and the overall dream, is problematic.⁴² The first tenet, that everyone can participate equally and can always start over, is troubling to the degree that it is not true. It is, of course, never true in the strongest sense, because people cannot shed their existing selves as snakes shed their skin. So the myth of the individual mini-state of nature is just that—a fantasy to be sought but never achieved.

Nothing is wrong with fantasies, however, so long as people understand that that is what they are. For that reason, a weaker formulation of the first tenet—people start the pursuit with varying degrees of advantage, but no one is barred from the pursuit—is more troubling because its falsity is much less clear. For most of American history, being a woman, Native American, Asian, black, or pauper has barred people from all but a very narrow range of

41. See *The Little House on the Prairie* (NBC television series 1974-1983).

42. For an earlier formulation of the defects of the American dream, see Jennifer L. Hochschild, *The Double-Edged Sword of Equal Opportunity*, in *POWER, INEQUALITY, AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS* 168, 168-200 (Ian Shapiro & Grant Reeher eds., 1988).

"electable futures."⁴³ The constraints of ascriptive traits arguably have weakened over time,⁴⁴ but until recently no more than about a third of the population was able to take seriously the first premise of the American dream.

This flaw has implications beyond the evident ones of racism and sexism. The emotional potency of the American dream has made people who *were* able to identify with it the norm for everyone else. White men, especially European immigrants able to ride the wave of the Industrial Revolution to comfort or even prosperity, became the epitomizing demonstration of America as the bountiful state of nature. Those who did not fit the model disappeared from the collective self-portrait. Thus the irony doubles: not only have most Americans been denied the ideal of universal participation, but also our national self-image denies the very fact of this denial.

This double irony creates deep misunderstandings and correspondingly deep political tensions. Consider, as an example, racial discrimination. Whereas the proportion of whites who believe that racial discrimination is declining has risen from three-tenths to nine-tenths over the past twenty-five years, the analogous proportion of blacks has *declined* from between 50% and 90% in the mid-1960s to between 20% and 45% in the late 1970s and 1980s.⁴⁵

43. For the origin of the phrase, see Douglas Rae, *Knowing Power*, in *POWER, INEQUALITY, AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS*, *supra* note 42, at 17, 20-21.

44. See, e.g., *United States v. Paradise*, 480 U.S. 149 (1987) (affirming lower court's order remedying four decades of racial discrimination in the Alabama Department of Public Safety); *Batson v. Kentucky*, 476 U.S. 79 (1986) (holding that the Constitution prohibits prosecutors from exercising peremptory strikes solely on the basis of race); *United States v. De Gross*, 960 F.2d 1433 (9th Cir. 1992) (holding that equal protection principles prohibit striking venirepersons on the basis of their gender). The constraints may regain their strength, however. For example, a survivor of Japanese internment camps pointed out: "The American Dream? I think: for whites only. I didn't feel that way before World War Two." TERKEL, *supra* note 6, at 161.

45. See WILLIAM BRINK & LOUIS HARRIS, *BLACK AND WHITE: A STUDY OF U.S. RACIAL ATTITUDES TODAY* 222-31 (1966); THOMAS E. CAVANAGH, *INSIDE BLACK AMERICA* 3 (1985) (contrasting 48% satisfaction, 43% dissatisfaction of whites, "with the way things are going in the U.S. at this time" with 14% satisfaction and 79% dissatisfaction of blacks in response to the same question); CBS NEWS/NEW YORK TIMES POLL, *THE KERNER COMMISSION-TEN YEARS LATER* 8 (1978); PHILIP E. CONVERSE ET AL., *AMERICAN SOCIAL ATTITUDES DATA SOURCEBOOK, 1947-1978*, at 79 (1980) (citing tabular data showing gross disparity from 1969-1976); LOUIS HARRIS AND ASSOC., *A STUDY OF ATTITUDES TOWARD RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND TOWARD WOMEN* 56 (1978) (citing figures showing both blacks and whites be-

To cite only one specific instance of these dramatically different perceptions, since 1963, between one-quarter and one-third of blacks have claimed that whites want to "keep blacks down";⁴⁶ in contrast, in 1988 only 6% of whites agreed.⁴⁷ Conversely, 52% of whites, compared with 30% of blacks, thought whites wanted to see blacks get a better break.⁴⁸

Most blacks, in short, do not believe that the first tenet of the American dream applies to them. Most whites deny this disbelief.⁴⁹ As a consequence of these very different starting points, blacks and whites typically disagree on the policies needed to enable blacks to realize the claim of the first tenet of the American dream. The most vocal disagreement is over affirmative action policies,⁵⁰ but debates over spending on urban infrastructure,⁵¹ management of social welfare,⁵² access to higher education,⁵³ and other topics all

lieve that black people will be better off in five years than they are now); JAMES JACKSON & GERALD GURIN, 2 NATIONAL SURVEY OF BLACK AMERICANS 1979-1980, at 679 (1980) (citing figures showing most black Americans feel that less racial discrimination exists today than did 20 years ago); JOINT CENTER FOR POLITICAL STUDIES, JOINT CENTER FOR POLITICAL STUDIES/GALLUP ORGANIZATION SURVEY, at tbl. 11 (1987); L.A. TIMES, LOS ANGELES TIMES POLL No. 71, at tbl. 86 (1983); GARY T. MARX, PROTEST AND PREJUDICE: A STUDY OF BELIEF IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY 5-11, 220 (1967); MEDIA GENERAL/ASSOCIATED PRESS, PUBLIC OPINION POLL, at tbls. 1, 2 (1988); HOWARD SCHUMAN ET AL., RACIAL ATTITUDES IN AMERICA at xiii, xiv, 118-27, 141-43 (1988); Hazel Erskine, *The Polls: Negro Philosophies of Life*, 33 PUB. OPINION Q. 156 (1969); Hazel Erskine, *The Polls: Race Relations*, 26 PUB. OPINION Q. 138 (1962); *Black and White: A Newsweek Poll*, NEWSWEEK, Mar. 7, 1988, at 18, 23.

46. *Black and White: A Newsweek Poll*, *supra* note 45, at 23.

47. *Id.*

48. *Id.*

49. For a more extensive analysis of how perceptions of racial discrimination differ by race, see Jennifer L. Hochschild & Monica Herk, "Yes, but . . .": *Principles and Caveats in American Racial Attitudes*, in 32 NOMOS, MAJORITIES AND MINORITIES 308 (John W. Chapman & Alan Wertheimer eds., 1990).

50. See, e.g., Ronald Brownstein, *The Times Poll; Black, White Americans Split Over Anti-Bias Law*, L.A. TIMES, Nov. 6, 1991, at A1; James P. Gannon, *Poll Shows Mixed Feelings on Affirmative Action*, GANNETT NEWS SERV., Nov. 7, 1991, available in Nexis Library, Gannett News Serv. file.

51. See, e.g., *The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour* (television broadcast, Jan. 9, 1990, transcript no. 3642) (discussing the National Urban League's proposed urban Marshall plan to help black Americans achieve greater economic progress).

52. See generally Clint Bolick & Mark B. Liedl, *Fulfilling America's Promise: A Civil Rights Strategy for the 1990s*, HERITAGE FOUND. REP., June 7, 1990, No. 773 (Backgrounder), at 24, 35 (proposing a conservative approach that empowers minorities in place of increasing benefits to those on the welfare rolls, as supported by minority leadership).

53. See, e.g., John Brennan, *Key Words Influence Stands on Minorities; Polls Find Whites Favor Remedial Programs—Until 'Quotas' or 'Preferences' are Mentioned*, L.A.

stem from divergent assumptions about whether the premise of equal access to the dream really holds true.

The partial success of the tenet of universal participation creates another problem—not for one group compared with another, but rather for one member of a group compared with others in that group. Members of a disfavored group who manage to escape their past often carry the psychological burden of all who have not escaped. As a student at Princeton University says:

I can't begin to describe the tension I sense in a classroom when I—the only black student in the class—speak. Before I open my mouth, I have to carefully edit in my mind everything I want to say. If I fumble with my words or say something that isn't exactly right, I see some turn away in embarrassment. . . . When this happens, I leave the room feeling as though I've further damaged young white America's perception of black students.

On the other hand, if what I say is well-orchestrated and sounds plausible, I see two reactions: one of surprise on the face of the other students that I could articulate and relate to such a mainstream topic, and another of relief, from those students who were hoping that I wasn't as one-dimensional as they had thought. When this sort of thing happens, I get a warm feeling inside, the feeling that comes from knowing you have represented your people adequately in the eyes of the disillusioned majority.⁵⁴

In my view, this student exaggerates—at least partly because no student ever pays such careful attention to the words of another. Whether fully warranted or not, however, the feeling that one must carry the load of all of one's people is a heavy burden.

B. The Second Tenet: Reasonable Anticipation of Success

The flaws of the second tenet of the American dream, the reasonable anticipation of success, stem from the close link between anticipation and expectation. That link presents little problem so

TIMES, Aug. 21, 1991, at A5 (indicating that 29% of white Americans polled believe quotas are necessary to accomplish fairness in education, hiring and promotion, while 61% of black Americans polled believe quotas to be necessary).

54. David Malebranche, *No Labels, Please*, THE VIGIL (Princeton University), Spring 1989, at 8.

long as enough resources and opportunities exist so that everyone has a reasonable chance of having some expectations met. Indeed, panegyrics to the American dream always expound on the bounty and openness of the American continent. For example, South Carolina Governor James Glen typified the eighteenth-century entrepreneurs of colonization by promising:

Adventurers will be pleased to find a Change from Poverty and Distress to Ease and Plenty; they are invited to a Country not yet half settled, where the Rivers are crouded with Fish, and the Forests with Game; and no Game-Act to restrain them from enjoying those Bounties of Providence, no heavy Taxes to impoverish them, nor oppressive Landlords to snatch the hard-earned Morsel from the Mouth of Indigence, and where Industry will certainly inrich them.⁵⁵

One and a half centuries later, the message was unchanged:

[W]hat tales the immigrants had to tell when they returned from America, the promised land! Nuggets of gold hanging on Christmas trees, diamonds on the waysides, sparkling pearls in crystal water begging to be held by human hands. And how good those homecomers looked—fur coats, cuffs on well-creased trousers, and money! Sure, big American bills. Not small like Swedish bills.⁵⁶

And it remains:

55. Message from James Glen (1749), *quoted in* WARREN B. SMITH, *WHITE SERVITUDE IN COLONIAL SOUTH CAROLINA* 51 (1961).

Half a century later, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur was less instrumental, but no less extravagant:

After a foreigner from any part of Europe is arrived, and become a citizen; let him devoutly listen to the voice of our great parent, which says to him, "Welcome to my shores, distressed European; bless the hour in which thou didst see my verdant fields, my fair navigable rivers, and my green mountains! If thou wilt work, I have bread for thee; if thou wilt be honest, sober, and industrious, I have greater rewards to confer on thee--ease and independence. . . . Go thou and work and till; thou shalt prosper, provided thou be just, grateful, and industrious."

J. HECTOR ST. JOHN CREVECOEUR, *LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER* 90-91 (Albert & Charles Boni 1925) (1782).

56. JOAN MORRISON & CHARLOTTE ZABUSKY, *AMERICAN MOSAIC: THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN THE WORDS OF THOSE WHO LIVED IT* 5 (1980) (quoting Walter Lindstrom, who emigrated to the United States in 1913, at age 17).

All my life I am thinking to come to this country. For what I read in the magazines, and the movies . . . I would have a beautiful castle in the United States. I will have a thousand servant. I will have five Rolls-Royces in my door . . . We thinking everybody has this kind of life . . . I have this kind of dream.⁵⁷

These fantasies are innocuous so long as the resources roughly balance the dreams for enough people enough of the time. If, however, they do not—or worse, if they used to but do no longer—then the dream rapidly loses its appeal. The particular circumstances that cause resources to no longer balance dreams vary, ranging from the closing of the frontier to an economic downturn to a rapid increase in the number of dreamers. The general point, though, always holds: no one promises that dreams will be fulfilled, but the distinction between the right to dream and the right to succeed is psychologically hard to maintain. Maintaining the distinction is especially hard because the dream sustains Americans against daily nightmares only if they believe that they have a significant likelihood, not just a formal chance, of reaching their goals.

In short, the right to aspire to success works as an ideological substitute for a guarantee of success only if it begins to approach the guarantee. When it becomes clear that chances for success are slim or getting slimmer, the whole tenor of the American dream changes dramatically.⁵⁸

The general problem of scarcity varies slightly depending on what form of success people anticipate. It is most obvious and

57. TERKEL, *supra* note 6, at 131 (quoting Miguel Cortez, a Cuban immigrant who originally worked as a janitor, but later obtained a government job).

58. Herbert Croly most powerfully articulated the political dangers for a polity that seems to promise success but does not deliver it:

A considerable proportion of the American people is beginning to exhibit economic and political . . . discontent. A generation ago the implication was that if a man remained poor and needy, his poverty was his own fault, because the American system was giving all its citizens a fair chance. Now, however, the discontented poor are beginning to charge their poverty to an unjust political and economic organization, and reforming agitators do not hesitate to support them in this contention. Manifestly a threatened obstacle has been raised against the anticipated realization of our national Promise. Unless the great majority of Americans not only have, but believe they have, a fair chance, the better American future will be dangerously compromised.

HERBERT CROLY, *THE PROMISE OF AMERICAN LIFE* 20 (1909).

acute for those focused on competitive success, where, by definition, resources and opportunities are insufficient to satisfy all dreamers.⁵⁹ Scarcity may be more problematic for those who look forward to relative success,⁶⁰ if only because there are more such people and because they have no *a priori* reason to assume that many will fail. Thus, journalists worry that “for the first time in living memory, America’s children have less hope of attaining a higher standard of living than their parents did.”⁶¹ The problem of scarcity may be most devastating, however, for people anticipating absolute success, because they have the least reason to expect that some will fail.⁶² Losers of this type have an unmatched poignancy: “I don’t dream any more like I used to. I believed that in this country, we would have all we needed for the decent life. I don’t see that any more.”⁶³

Conversely, the availability of resources and opportunities may shape the kind of success that people dream of. If resources are profoundly scarce as in a famine, or inherently limited as in election to the Presidency, people almost certainly envision competitive success. If resources are moderately scarce, people will be concerned about their position relative to that of others, but will not necessarily see another’s gain as their loss. When resources and opportunities seem wide open—anyone can achieve salvation, get an “A” on the exam, claim 160 acres of western prairie—people are most free to pursue their own dreams and measure their achievement by their own absolute standard.

This logic suggests a dynamic: as resources become tighter, people are likely to shift their hopes for success from absolute to relative to competitive. For example, before the 1980s, according to one journalist, “there was always enough to go around, plenty of places in the sun. It didn’t even matter much about the rich—so

59. See *supra* notes 17-21 and accompanying text (defining competitive success).

60. See *supra* notes 14-16 and accompanying text (defining relative success).

61. Mark L. Goldstein, *The End of the American Dream?*, INDUS. WK., Apr. 4, 1988, at 77, 77.

62. See *supra* notes 10-13 and accompanying text (defining absolute success).

63. TERKEL, *supra* note 6, at 116 (quoting Florence Scala, daughter of Italian immigrants who led the fight against city hall to save her old neighborhood on Chicago’s near west side).

long as everyone was living better, it seemed the rich couldn't be denied their chance to get richer."⁶⁴ But

today [in 1988] that wave [of prosperity] has crested . . . Now when the rich get richer, the middle class stagnates—and the poor get decidedly poorer. If left unchecked, a polarization of income . . . is likely to provoke consequences that will affect America's politics and power, to say nothing of its psyche.⁶⁵

The risks of anticipating success do not stop with anticipation. Attaining one's dreams can be surprisingly problematic as well. From Shakespeare to Theodore Dreiser, writers have limned the loneliness of being at the top, the spiritual costs of cutthroat competition, the shallowness of a society that rewards success above all else. Alexis de Tocqueville characteristically provided one of the most eloquent of these admonitions:

Every American is eaten up with longing to rise . . . In America I have seen the freest and best educated of men in circumstances the happiest in the world; yet it seemed to me that a cloud habitually hung on their brow, and they seemed serious and almost sad even in their pleasures. The chief reason for this is that . . . [they] never stop thinking of the good things they have not got. It is odd to watch with what feverish ardor the Americans pursue prosperity and how they are ever tormented by the shadowy suspicion that they may not have chosen the shortest route to get it . . . They clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight.⁶⁶

64. Goldstein, *supra* note 61, at 77.

65. *Id.*

66. ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* 503, 508 (J.P. Mayer & Max Lerner eds. & George Lawrence trans., Doubleday & Co. 1966) (1835).

Once again, Studs Terkel's respondents parallel learned discourse. To a wealthy professional,

the American Dream always has a greater force when you don't already have it. People who grew up without it are told if you can only work long enough and hard enough, you can get that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. When you already have the pot of gold, the dream loses its force.

TERKEL, *supra* note 6, at 123 (quoting Leon Duncan, an historian who is a member of a wealthy New England family). A struggling ex-convict is more rueful: "It was always competition. I went from competing in sports to competing in crime . . . I always wanted to be at the top of something. So I became the first dope fiend in the neighborhood." *Id.* at 218

Tocqueville continued by pointing out that the obsession with ever more success threatens not only the individual soul but also the body politic:

When the taste for physical pleasures has grown more rapidly than either education or experience of free institutions, the time comes when men are carried away and lose control of themselves at sight of the new good things they are ready to snatch There is no need to drag their rights away from citizens of this type; they themselves voluntarily let them go. They find it a tiresome inconvenience to exercise political rights which distract them from industry The role of government is left unfilled. If, at this critical moment, an able and ambitious man once gets power, he finds the way open for usurpations of every sort.⁶⁷

Not only nineteenth-century romantics cautioned against the failures of success. Today, psychotherapists specialize in helping "troubled winners"⁶⁸ or the "Working Wounded,"⁶⁹ for whom "[a] life too much devoted to pursuing money, power, position, and control over others ends up being emotionally impoverished."⁷⁰ Success, in short, is not all it's cracked up to be, even (or especially) in a nation where it is the centerpiece of the dominant ideology.

The problems of success, however, pale beside the problems of failure. Because success is so central to Americans' self-image,⁷¹ and because they expect as well as hope to achieve it, Americans

(quoting Ken Jackson, an ex-convict and former drug addict now working with youngsters in prisons).

67. DE TOCQUEVILLE, *supra* note 66, at 512.

68. DOUGLAS LABIER, MODERN MADNESS: THE EMOTIONAL FALLOUT OF SUCCESS 10 (1986); see also Cindy Skrzycki, *Healing the Wounds of Success*, WASH. POST, July 23, 1989, at H1 (discussing LaBier and his psychotherapy practice in Washington D.C.).

69. For an explication of the term, see LABIER, *supra* note 68, at 69-96.

70. Skrzycki, *supra* note 68, at H4; see also STEVEN BERGLAS, THE SUCCESS SYNDROME: HITTING BOTTOM WHEN YOU REACH THE TOP 139-52 (1986) (analyzing and prescribing for "success depression").

71. Consider the effects of the 1971 draft lottery on self-esteem. In one experiment, young men completed paper-and-pencil measures of self-esteem, then listened to the lottery, then retook the self-esteem index. "[S]ubjects whose numbers put them in the fortunate half of their group tended to experience increased self-esteem, while those whose numbers put them in the unfortunate half of their group tended to experience decreased self-esteem." Zick Rubin & Anne Peplau, *Belief in a Just World and Reactions to Another's Lot*, J. Soc. ISSUES, No. 4 1973, at 73, 81.

are not gracious about failure. Others' failure reminds them that the dream may be just that—a dream, to be distinguished from waking reality. Their own failure confirms that fear. Assistant professors denied tenure thus report a sudden case of “leprosy”; their friends back away from them, and their own bodies betray their internal selves.⁷²

Furthermore, the better the dream works for other people, the more devastating failure is for the smaller and smaller proportion of people left behind. Thus in World War II, members of military units with a high probability of promotion were less satisfied with advancement opportunities than members of units with a much lower probability of promotion, because failure to earn promotion in the former case was both more salient and more demonstrably a personal rather than a systemic flaw.⁷³ In short, the ideology of the American dream includes no cushion for failure; a failed dream denies the loser not only success but even a shred of dignity to cover or soften the loss.

C. *The Third Tenet: Success is Within One's Own Control*

The nakedness of failure is made more stark by the third premise of the American dream—the belief that success results from actions and traits under one's own control.⁷⁴ Logic does not sup-

72. For an account of the fall from academic grace, see Gary T. Marx, *Reflections on Academic Success and Failure*, in *AUTHORS OF THEIR OWN LIVES* 260 (Bennett Berger ed., 1990)

73. 1 SAMUEL STOFFER ET AL., *THE AMERICAN SOLDIER* 250-58 (1949). Albert Hirschman describes the same phenomenon as the “tunnel effect”: automobile drivers in a traffic jam in a tunnel are initially pleased when cars in the adjacent lane begin to move because advances of others supply information about a more benign external environment; receipt of this information produces gratification; and this gratification overcomes, or at least suspends, *envy* . . . As long as the tunnel effect lasts, everybody feels better off, both those who have become richer and those who have not.

Albert O. Hirschman, *The Changing Tolerance for Income Inequality in the Course of Economic Development*, 87 Q.J. ECON. 544, 546-48 (1973) (footnote omitted). At some point, however, those left behind come to believe that their heightened expectations will not be met; not only are their hopes now dashed, but they are also left in a relatively worse position than when the upward mobility began. “Nonrealization of the expectation [that my turn to move will soon come] will at some point result in my ‘becoming furious,’ that is, in my turning into an enemy of the established order.” *Id.* at 552.

74. See *supra* notes 28-30 and accompanying text (discussing the third tenet).

port the reasoning that if success results from individual volition, then failure results from lack of volition. All one needs in order to understand the logical flaw here is the distinction between necessary and sufficient. That distinction is not obvious or intuitive, however, and in any case the psycho-logic of the American dream differs from strict logic. In the psycho-logic, if one may claim responsibility for success, one must accept responsibility for failure.

Americans who do everything they can and still fail may come to understand that effort and talent alone do not guarantee success, but they have a hard time persuading others. After all, they are losers—why listen to them? Will we not benefit more by listening to winners, who seldom challenge the premise that effort and talent breed success? Americans are thus much less willing than Europeans to ascribe poverty to structural flaws, or wealth to the prior ownership of wealth. For example, in 1985 only 31% of Americans agreed that “[i]n America what you achieve in life depends largely on your family background,”⁷⁵ compared with 51% of Austrians, 52% of Britons, and 63% of Italians.⁷⁶ Germans resemble Americans on this question; only 35% agreed.⁷⁷ However, three-quarters of American respondents and only half of the Germans agreed that “differences in social standing between people are acceptable because they basically reflect what people made out of the opportunities they had.”⁷⁸ Similarly, 85% of Americans and 72% of Germans agreed that “America (Germany) has an open society. What one achieves in life no longer depends on one’s family background, but on the abilities one has and the education one

75. Tom W. Smith, *The Welfare State in Cross-National Perspective*, 51 PUB. OPINION Q. 404, 411 (1987). All results combine “Agree strongly” and “Agree” categories. *Id.*

76. *Id.*

77. *Id.*

78. Tom Smith, *Public Opinion and the Welfare State: A Crossnational Perspective*, Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (1987). Data were not available for other nations. All results combine “Agree strongly” and “Agree” categories.

In 1972, more American (73%) than British (66%) adolescents agreed that “people get to be rich . . . [by] work[ing] for their money.” Alan J. Stern & Donald D. Searing, *The Stratification Beliefs of English and American Adolescents*, 6 BRIT. J. POL. SCI. 177, 198 tbl. 13 (1976). The other response choices were luck, inheritance, or don’t know. *Id.* Conversely, 45% of Americans and only 26% of Britons agreed that “people get to be poor . . . [because] they don’t work hard enough.” *Id.*, at 198 tbl. 14. The other response choices were lack of luck, lack of a fair chance, or don’t know. *Id.*

acquires."⁷⁹ In short, the fact of failure is unseemly because it challenges the implicit promise of the American dream. People who fail are further stigmatized because they presumably manifest—to winners more than to losers, to be sure—weakness of will or lack of talent.

D. The Fourth Tenet: Success Equals Virtue

The final blow to the American dream comes from its fourth tenet, the association of success with virtue.⁸⁰ By the psycho-logic just described, if success implies virtue, failure implies sin.

American history and popular culture are replete with demonstrations of the connection between failure and sin. In the 1600s, indentured servants—kidnapped children, convicts, and struggling families alike—were met on the shores of the New World with the assumption that they were all “strong and idle beggars, vagabonds, egyptians, comon and notorious whoores, theeves, and other dissolute and lousy persons.”⁸¹ A century later, even revolutionaries assumed “that only the ‘shiftless, diseased, or vicious’ were ‘labourers, . . . who look to the earning of today for the subsistence of tomorrow.’”⁸² Members of nineteenth-century reform societies concurred, stating that fallen women were typically “the daughters of the ignorant, depraved and vicious part of our population, trained up without culture of any kind, amidst the contagion of evil example, and enter upon a life of prostitution for the gratification of their unbridled passions, and become harlots altogether by choice.”⁸³

79. Smith, *supra* note 78.

80. See *supra* notes 31-36 (discussing the fourth tenet).

81. GARY B. NASH, *RED, WHITE, AND BLACK: THE PEOPLES OF EARLY AMERICA* 217 (1982) (quoting Warrant of the Scottish Privy Council to Local Authorities (1669) (describing how such warrants were sent to local officials urging them to recruit local undesirables for a colonizing trip to what they promised would be a new life—or a quick death—in the New World)).

82. JACKSON T. MAIN, *THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA* 198 (1965) (quoting 1 TIMOTHY DWIGHT, *TRAVELS IN NEW-ENGLAND AND NEW-YORK* 193-94 (1821)).

83. MAGDALEN SOCIETY, *FIRST ANNUAL REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE* (1830), in *THE REFORM IMPULSE, 1825-1850*, at 41, 42 (Walter G. Hugins ed., 1972). Readers are, however, assured that such prostitutes “have a short career, generally dying of the effects of intemperance and pollution soon after entering upon this road to ruin.” *Id.*

Small wonder that by the late twentieth century, even the poor blame the poor for their condition. Despite her vivid awareness of exploitation by the rich, an aging cleaning woman insists that many people are poor because they "make the money and drink it all up. They don't care about the kids or the clothes. Just have a bottle on that table all the time."⁸⁴ Losers even blame themselves: an unemployed factory worker, handicapped by a childhood accident, "wish[es] to hell I could do it [save money for his children]. I always said for years, 'I wanna get rich, I wanna get rich.' But then, phew! My mind doesn't have the strong will. I say, 'Well, I'm gonna do it.' Only the next day's different."⁸⁵ They are not unusual. In 1985, 60% of poor people, compared with 61% of the nonpoor, agreed that often "welfare encourages husbands to avoid family responsibilities."⁸⁶ Even more startling, 64% of the poor, but only 44% of the nonpoor, agreed that often "[p]oor young women have babies so they can collect welfare."⁸⁷

The equation of failure with evil and success with virtue is not attributable to poor education or low status. In one experiment, for example, college students "who learned that a fellow student had been awarded a cash prize as a result of a random drawing were likely to conclude that he had in fact worked especially hard."⁸⁸ Another experiment compared reactions to a fellow student (actually a confederate of the experimenter) in two conditions, one in which subjects had no control over the apparently painful electric shocks received by the confederate, and one in which the subjects could reassign the confederate to receive money rather than shocks.⁸⁹ "Subjects who knew that the victim would be compensated rated her more favorably than those who knew that her suffering was to continue. The ratings provided in the latter condition indicated considerable rejection of the victim, suggesting that she

84. JENNIFER L. HOCHSCHILD, *WHAT'S FAIR?: AMERICAN BELIEFS ABOUT DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE* 113 (1981).

85. *Id.* at 116.

86. I.A. Lewis & William Schneider, *Hard Times: The Public on Poverty*, *PUB. OPINION*, June-July 1985, at 2, 7.

87. *Id.*

88. Zick Rubin & Letitia A. Peplau, *Who Believes in a Just World?* *J. SOC. ISSUES*, No. 3 1975, at 65, 68.

89. *Id.* at 67.

was seen as somehow deserving her fate."⁹⁰ The most persuasive experiment is the one with the most verisimilitude. After watching the 1971 draft lottery, students rated the attractiveness of their dorm mates. Subjects with high scores on a previously administered Just World Scale "were more likely . . . to prefer winners to losers . . . with respect to liking, desire to give comfort, favorability, and lack of resentment."⁹¹

The association of success with virtue obviously harms losers. The association, though, creates equally important, if less obvious, problems for winners. On the one hand, if I believe that virtue produced my success, or that success has made me even more virtuous, I am likely to become insufferably smug. That may not bother me much, but the fact that people around me feel the same way will.⁹² In addition, this equation raises the stakes very high for further rounds of endeavor. If I continue to win, all is well; if I falter, I lose my *amour propre* as well as my wealth or power. On the other hand, if I recognize that my success is due partly to my lying to a few clients, evading a few taxes, or cheating a few employees, then I am likely to take on considerable guilt. This guilt might induce reform and recompense, but it may just as well induce drinking to assuage the unease, persecution of other nonvirtuous winners, attempts to show that losers are even more sinful, or simple hypocrisy.⁹³

These problems intensify when patterns of group success, rather than the idiosyncracies of individual success, are at issue. If members of one group are seen as disproportionately successful, that group acquires a halo of ascribed virtue. For example, consider an article titled *The Great Jewish Invasion* that appeared in *McClure's* in 1907.⁹⁴ The author's ethnicity, the publication, the date,

90. *Id.*

91. *Id.* at 84.

92. For the classic depiction of the costs of smugness among the successful, see MICHAEL YOUNG, *THE RISE OF THE MERITOCRACY: 1870-2033* (1958).

93. For a discussion of the central role of hypocrisy in American liberal democracy, see SAMUEL HUNTINGTON, *AMERICAN POLITICS: THE PROMISE OF DISHARMONY* 31-41, 61-70 (1981); JUDITH N. SHKLAR, *ORDINARY VICES* 67-78 (1984). *But see* W. Carey McWilliams, *Pudd'nhead Wilson on Democratic Governance*, in MARK TWAIN'S *PUDD'NHEAD WILSON: RACE, CONFLICT, AND CULTURE* 177 (Susan Gillman & Forrest Robinson eds., 1990) (stating that Mark Twain apparently saw hypocrisy as Americans' greatest virtue).

94. Burton J. Hendrick, *The Great Jewish Invasion*, 28 *McCLURE'S* 307 (1907).

and the article's title all lead one to expect an anti-Semitic diatribe, at best only thinly veiled. The first few pages seem to confirm that expectation, with their claims that "the real modern Zion, greater in numbers and wealth and power than the old, steadily gathers on Manhattan Island,"⁹⁵ and that "[t]he Jews are active, and invariably with success, in practically every business, professional, and intellectual field. The New Yorker constantly rubs elbows with Israel."⁹⁶ The article continues by saying that these feats are all the more "remarkable" because "the great mass of [New York's] Jews are not what are commonly regarded as the most enlightened of their race"⁹⁷ because they are from eastern rather than western Europe.⁹⁸ After all, "[n]o people have had a more inadequate preparation, educational and economic, for American citizenship."⁹⁹ The article, nevertheless, goes on to describe in careful and admiring detail how these dirt-poor, ignorant, orthodox immigrants work, save, cooperate, sacrifice for their children—and end up wealthy beyond anyone's wildest imaginings.¹⁰⁰ Nor are they merely money-grubbers; Russian Jews are "individualist[s]"¹⁰¹ who constitute the "city's largest productive force and the greatest contributor to its manufacturing wealth,"¹⁰² demonstrating "intense ambition,"¹⁰³ abstinence, and foresight.¹⁰⁴ In his highest possible accolade, the author even insists that the Russian Jew's

enthusiasm for America knows no bounds. He eagerly looks forward to the time when he can be naturalized. . . . The rapidity with which the New York Jew adopts the manners and trappings of Americans almost disproves his ancient heritage as a peculiar people.

. . . .

95. *Id.* at 307-08.

96. *Id.* at 309.

97. *Id.* at 310.

98. *Id.*

99. *Id.* at 311.

100. *Id.* at 312-21.

101. *Id.* at 314.

102. *Id.*

103. *Id.*

104. *See id.* at 317-18 (discussing investment in real estate).

Better than any other element, even the native stock, do they meet the two supreme tests of citizenship; they actually go to the polls, and when once there, vote independently.¹⁰⁵

In short, in one generation the East European Orthodox Jewish immigrant had gone from an unassimilable, bovine drag on the American spirit¹⁰⁶ to the epitome of all the American virtues. Nothing succeeds like success.

The contemporary equivalent of Mr. Hendrick's "amazing" Jews are Southeast Asians. A century ago, one could hardly derogate Chinese and Japanese immigrants enough.¹⁰⁷ Now newspapers have a seemingly endless supply of rags-to-riches stories such as the one about destitute boat people whose daughter became the high school valedictorian a scant five years later and is now in a pre-med program at Stanford.¹⁰⁸ Such success is inevitably due to hard work, self-discipline, family support, and refusal to follow the bad example set by American-born students.¹⁰⁹ This journalistic trend has become so powerful that spokespeople for Asian immigrants feel impelled to insist publicly that not *all* Asians escape

105. *Id.* at 320-21.

106. Even Jews who had arrived earlier were hardly complimentary about the new Jewish immigrants:

They are a bane to the country and a curse to the Jews. The Jews have earned an enviable reputation in the United States, but this has been undermined by the influx of thousands who are not ripe for the enjoyment of liberty and equal rights, and all who mean well for the Jewish name should prevent them as much as possible from coming there. The experience of the charity teaches that organized immigration from Russia, Roumania, and other semi-barbarous countries is a mistake and has proved a failure. It is no relief to the Jews of Russia, Poland, etc., and it jeopardizes the well-being of the American Jews.

Zosa Szajowski, *The Attitude of American Jews to East European Jewish Immigration (1881-1893)*, 40 AM. JEWISH HIST. SOC'Y 221, 232 (1951) (quoting the response of the United Jewish Charities of Rochester, New York, to an inquiry from a committee of English Jews).

107. For example, in 1874 the periodical *Thistleton's Jolly Giant* produced a cartoon on its cover with the following caption: "The *Jolly Giant's* artist, George F. Keller, is a believer in Darwinism; . . . in proof of the theory . . . he has produced . . . [a drawing] showing conclusively that John Chinaman has had his origin in a Monkey; from thence to a Chinaman, and eventually into a pig; any further comment would be useless." THISTLETON'S JOLLY GIANT, Feb. 21, 1874, at 1, reprinted in Dan Caldwell, *The Negroization of the Chinese Stereotype in California*, 53 S. CAL. Q. 123, 123-25 (1971).

108. See, e.g., Fox Butterfield, *Why Asians Are Going to the Head of the Class*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 3, 1986, Education, at 18-23 (describing the academic success of Asian Americans).

109. *Id.* (attributing such success to hard work and the Asian family).

poverty, crime, and discrimination, and that even the most successful pay a heavy emotional cost.¹¹⁰

To argue that excessive praise is as bad as racism or ethnic slurs would be churlish.¹¹¹ The problem is that the newly anointed group is often used to cast aspersions, implicit or explicit, on some other equally despised group that has not managed to fulfill the American dream. In Burton Hendrick's case, the main negative reference group is the Irish, who drink and gamble, yield their productive jobs to Jews, and, worst of all, band together in labor unions, in the "Irish vote," and in political party machines.¹¹² In the case of immigrant Asians, the usual—if slightly more subtle—message is, "Why can't American blacks do the same thing? After all, they at least speak English when they start school." This dynamic adds yet another component to the nightmare of a failed American dream. Members of a denigrated group are disproportionately likely to fail to achieve their goals; they take blame as individuals, and perhaps blame themselves, for their failure; and they carry a further stigma as members of a group that cannot help itself as other groups have done.

E. Defects in the Overall Dream

Let us, finally, consider several problems inherent in the ideology of the American dream as a whole rather than in any single tenet. The American dream need not, but often does, take on a radically individualist cast. Achievers mark their success by moving away from the tenement, ghetto, or holler of their impoverished and impotent youth, thus speeding the breakup of their ethnic community. This is a bittersweet phenomenon. The freedom to move up and out is desirable, or at least desired; however, certainly those left behind, probably those who leave, and arguably the nation as a whole lose when groups of people with close cultural and personal ties break those ties in the pursuit of "the bitch-goddess,

110. See, e.g., Reed Ueda, *False Modesty*, NEW REPUBLIC, July 3, 1989, at 16, 16-17 (noting that group success has led to a model minority image which hides many of the problems currently afflicting Asian-American societies).

111. For further examples of this genre, and for arguments against taking it at face value, see STEPHEN STEINBERG, *THE ETHNIC MYTH: RACE, ETHNICITY, AND CLASS IN AMERICA* 82-105 (1989).

112. Hendrick, *supra* note 94, at 321.

success."¹¹³ The line between autonomy and atomism is hard to draw.

American culture is full of stories about the bittersweet effects of success on communities and their residents. A Polish folksong tells of a man who emigrated to America, worked for three years in a foundry, returned home with "gold and silver,"¹¹⁴ but found that "my children did not know me, [f]or they fled from me, a stranger."¹¹⁵ A refugee from the White Army who "was all hopes for come back and save Russia"¹¹⁶ describes "[o]nly one thing that's important to me, I am very sorry that it not happen. I teach my children that they have to speak Russian. They speak, but my grandchildren no."¹¹⁷ The emancipated children may be as distressed as the abandoned parents. In 1933 five brothers complained to the *Jewish Daily Forward*:

Imagine, even when we go with our father to buy something in a store on Fifth Avenue, New York, he insists on speaking Yiddish. We are not ashamed of our parents, God forbid, but they ought to know where it's proper and where it's not. If they talk Yiddish among themselves at home, or to us, it's bad enough, but among strangers and Christians? Is that nice?¹¹⁸

To wish that peasants and villagers would opt for tradition rather than opportunity would be irresponsible romanticism. It is surely significant that throughout the world and across centuries, they almost never do.¹¹⁹ Still, one can regret what is lost.

113. The term is from Letter from William James to H.G. Wells, in 2 *THE LETTERS OF WILLIAM JAMES* 260 (1920) ("[T]he moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS. That—with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word success—is our national disease.").

114. JOHN J. BUKOWCZYK, *AND MY CHILDREN DID NOT KNOW ME: A HISTORY OF THE POLISH-AMERICANS* frontispiece (1987).

115. *Id.*

116. MORRISON & ZABUSKY, *supra* note 56, at 108 (quoting Gregory Leontyeff, who immigrated from the Soviet Union in 1923 at about age 25).

117. *Id.*

118. LOREN BARITZ, *THE GOOD LIFE: THE MEANING OF SUCCESS FOR THE AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS* 136 (1989).

119. For illuminating accounts of the rarity of return migration, see John Cromartie & Carol B. Stack, *Reinterpretation of Black Return and Nonreturn Migration to the South 1975-1990*, 79 *GEOGRAPHICAL REV.* 297 (1989); Carol Stack, *The Journeys of Black Children: An Intergenerational Perspective*, in *COMMUNITY, SOCIETY, AND MIGRATION: NONECONOMIC MIGRATION* (P. Jobes ed., forthcoming 1992).

F. *The Problem of the Dream's Dominance*

A final problem of the American dream results from its very dominance. Americans have few models and little historical sanction for simply opting out of the drive for wealth, status, or power. We do not, however, lack for eloquent arguments against the success drive. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden Pond*¹²⁰ has itself become an icon. At the height of the Jacksonian celebration of opportunities for the common man, James Fenimore Cooper sniffed, "A people that deems the possession of riches its highest source of distinction, admits one of the most degrading of all influences to preside over its opinions."¹²¹ At the turn of the century, the New Orleans *Picayune* lamented that the United States had lost the social repose of Old World communities where "men still follow their fathers' trades as they take their fathers' names, and where people generally are not working themselves to death in a desperate effort to outshine each other."¹²² Even in the "me-decade" of the 1980s, George Will based a thriving journalistic career on the claim of being among the last of the old-time Tories, expounding on "the disappointment many people feel about affluence. There is a vague feeling that economic growth has not fulfilled its promise. . . . Envy has increased while society has become more wealthy."¹²³

Most Americans, however, honor this alternative vision more in the breach than in the observance, if then. We have no powerful ascetic tradition comparable to that of Hindus, Buddhists, and Native Americans.¹²⁴ We have instead Thoreau, the Shakers,¹²⁵ and 1960s hippies—curiosities from whom we take furniture and hair

120. See HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *WALDEN* (Vail-Ballou Press, 1946) (1984). *Walden* is an account of Thoreau's life alone for two years on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts.

121. JAMES F. COOPER, *THE AMERICAN DEMOCRAT* 138 (1838).

122. WYLLIE, *supra* note 29, at 137 (citing *The Sacrifice of the Present*, 27 *CURRENT LITERATURE* 118 (1900)).

123. GEORGE WILL, *The Hell of Affluence*, in *THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS AND OTHER SOBERING THOUGHTS* 97, 98 (1978).

124. See generally *THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF LIVING FAITHS* 225-60, 267-320 (Robert C. Zaehner ed., 1959) (providing a comprehensive overview of the tenets of Hinduism and Buddhism); SAM D. GILL, *NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIONS: AN INTRODUCTION* (1982) (explaining the religion and mythology of North American natives).

125. See generally ANNA WHITE & LEILA S. TAYLOR, *SHAKERISM: ITS MEANING AND MESSAGE* (1904) (providing an historical account of Shakerism and a description of its beliefs).

styles, once they are distant enough not to challenge our daily lives. We have similarly little in our ideological toolkit to help us see “small is beautiful”¹²⁶ and “social limits to growth”¹²⁷ as attractive alternatives rather than dystopias to be staved off as long as possible.¹²⁸

V. CONCLUSION

Tocqueville assured his readers that “up to now the Americans have happily avoided all the reefs I have just charted.”¹²⁹ Arguably we continue, 150 years later, to sail free, and perhaps we always will. If the nation does hit the reefs, however, the ideology of the American dream will not be of much help. Just as individuals whose dreams fail are left with precious few emotional and material resources, so a society which stakes so much on a dream of ever-expanding success is deeply vulnerable to natural, social, or demographic boundaries. This point brings us back to the beginning—the meaning of the American dream, and its implications for Americans’ belief in and practice of equality. In the end, the ideology boils down to a profession of hope. It is profoundly egalitarian in at least three ways: it offers that hope to all individuals, at every point in their lives; it posits that all have the means at hand to realize their hopes; and it accepts all wishes as equally deserving and equally precious. It is, however, profoundly inegalitarian also. Its endorsement of inequality is most obvious when success is defined competitively, but the endorsement does not stop there. Losers, whether individuals or groups, have no value in the ideology except insofar as they are potential winners sometime in the future.¹³⁰ The harshness of this judgment has always been masked

126. For an elaboration of the phrase, see E.F. SCHUMACHER, *SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL: A STUDY OF ECONOMICS AS IF PEOPLE MATTERED* (1989).

127. For further explanation of this term, see FRED HIRSCH, *SOCIAL LIMITS TO GROWTH* (1976).

128. Most Americans equally reject other possible alternatives to the success ethic, such as a class-based society with an inherited hierarchy, a military or theocratic society with a goal of collective glory, or an egalitarian society with small cooperative producers or large collective enterprises.

129. DE TOCQUEVILLE, *supra* note 66, at 513.

130. Regions, too, can be losers in this respect. See C. VANN WOODWARD, *THINKING BACK: THE PERILS OF WRITING HISTORY* 101-19 (1986) (discussing the South as the only region in America whose residents have a tragic vision).

by the fact that most people win at least a little bit, or are simply written out of the game as nonplayers. The draconian judgment is never far from the profession of hope, however, and one cannot understand the profoundly ambiguous nature of the American dream unless both its egalitarian and inegalitarian sides are kept simultaneously in view.