

THE AMERICAN DREAM?

Historically, the United States has been viewed as "the land of opportunity," attracting immigrants from all over the world. The opportunities they believed they would find in America and the experiences they actually had when they arrived nurtured this set of values. In this chapter, we will examine six basic values that have become "traditional" American values. Three represent traditional reasons why immigrants have been drawn to America: the chance for individual freedom, equality of opportunity, and material wealth. In order to achieve these benefits, however, there were prices to be paid: self-reliance, competition, and hard work, in time, these prices themselves became a part of the traditional value system.

Individual Freedom and Self-Reliance

The earliest settlers came to the North American continent to establish colonies that were free from the controls that existed in European societies. They wanted to escape the controls placed on their lives by kings and governments, priests and churches, noblemen and aristocrats. To a great extent, they succeeded. In 1776, the British colonial settlers declared their independence from England and established a new nation, the United States of America.

The United States came to be associated in their minds with the concept of *individual freedom*. This is probably the most basic of all the American values. Scholars and outside observers often call this value *individualism*, but many Americans use the word *freedom*. Perhaps the word *freedom* is one of the most respected popular words in the United States today.

By freedom, Americans mean the desire and the ability of all individuals to control their own destiny without outside interference from the government, a ruling noble class, the church, or any other organized authority. The desire to be free of controls was a basic value of the new nation in 1776, and it has continued to attract immigrants to this country.

There is, however, a price to be paid for this individual freedom: *self-reliance*. Individuals must learn to rely on themselves or risk losing freedom. This means achieving both financial and emotional independence from their parents as early as possible, usually by age 18 or 21. It means that Americans believe they should take care of themselves, solve their own problems, and "stand on their own two feet." De Tocqueville observed the Americans' belief in self-reliance nearly 200 years ago in the 1830s:

They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.

This strong belief in self-reliance continues today as a traditional basic American value. It is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of the American character to understand, but it is profoundly important. Most Americans believe that they must be self-reliant in order to keep their freedom. If they rely too much on the support of their families or the government or any organization, they may lose some of their freedom to do what they want.

If people are dependent, they risk losing freedom as well as the respect of their **peers**. Even if they are not truly self-reliant, most Americans believe they must at least appear to be so. In order to be in the mainstream of American life—to have power and/or respect—individuals must be seen as self-reliant. Although receiving financial support from **charity**, family, or the government is allowed, it is never admired.

Equality of Opportunity and Competition

The second important reason why immigrants have traditionally been drawn to the United States is the belief that everyone has a chance to succeed here. Generations of immigrants, from the earliest settlers to the present day, have come to the United States with this expectation. They have felt that because individuals are free from excessive political, religious, and social controls, they have a better chance for personal success. Of particular importance is the lack of a hereditary aristocracy.

Because titles of nobility were forbidden in the Constitution, no formal class system developed in the United States. In the early years of American history, many immigrants chose to leave the older European societies because they believed that they had a better chance to succeed in America. In "the old country," their place in life was determined largely by the social class into which they were born. They knew that in America they would not have to live among noble families who possessed great power and wealth inherited and accumulated over hundreds of years.

Because millions of these immigrants succeeded, Americans came to believe in *equality of opportunity*. When de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, he was impressed by the great uniformity of conditions of life in the new nation. He wrote:

The more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that... equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived.

It is important to understand what most Americans mean when they say they believe in equality of opportunity. They do not mean that everyone is—or should be—equal. However, they do mean that each individual should have an equal chance for success. Americans see much of life as a race for success. For them, equality means that everyone should have an equal chance to enter the race and win. In other words, equality of opportunity may be thought of as an ethical rule. It helps ensure that the race for success is a fair one and that a person does not win just because he or she was born into a wealthy family, or lose because of race or religion. This American concept of "fair play" is an important aspect of the belief in equality of opportunity. President Abraham Lincoln expressed this belief in the 1860s when he said:

We... wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else. When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition; he knows that there is no fixed condition of labor for his whole life.

There is, however, a price to be paid for this equality of opportunity: *competition*. If much of life is seen as a race, then a person must run the race in order to succeed; a person must compete with others. If every person has an equal chance to succeed in

the United States, then it is every person's duty to try. Americans match their energy and intelligence against that of others in a competitive contest for success.

The pressure to compete causes Americans to be energetic, but it also places a constant emotional strain on them. When they retire (traditionally at age 65), they are at last free from the pressures of competition. But then a new problem arises. They may feel useless and unwanted in a society that gives so much prestige to those who compete well. This is one reason why older people in the United States do not have as much honor and respect as they have in other, less competitive societies. In fact, any group of people who do not compete successfully—for whatever reason—do not fit into the mainstream of American life as well as those who do compete.

Material Wealth and Hard Work

The third reason why immigrants have traditionally come to the United States is to have a better life—that is, to raise their standard of living. For the vast majority of the immigrants who came here, it was probably the most compelling reason for leaving their homeland. Because of its incredibly abundant natural resources, the United States appeared to be a "land of plenty" where millions could come to seek their fortunes. Of course, most immigrants did not "get rich overnight," and many of them suffered terribly, but the majority of them were eventually able to improve upon their former standard of living. Even if they were not able to achieve the economic success they wanted, they could be fairly certain that their children would have the opportunity for a better life. The phrase "going from rags to riches" became a slogan for the great American Dream. Because of the vast riches of the North American continent, the dream came true for many of the immigrants. They achieved material success; they became very attached to material things. *Material wealth* became a value to the American people.

Probably the main reason is that material wealth has traditionally been a widely accepted measure of social status in the United States. Because Americans rejected the European system of hereditary aristocracy and titles of nobility, they had to find a substitute for judging social status. The quality and quantity of an individual's material possessions became an accepted measure of success and social status. Moreover, as we shall see in later chapters, the Puritan work ethic associated material success with godliness.

Americans have paid a price, however, for their material wealth: *hard work*. The North American continent was rich in natural resources when the first settlers arrived, but all these resources were undeveloped. Only by hard work could these natural resources be converted into material possessions, allowing a more comfortable standard of living. Hard work has been both necessary and rewarding for most Americans throughout their history. Because of this, they came to see material possessions as the natural reward for their hard work. In some ways, material possessions were seen not only as tangible evidence of people's work but also of their abilities. In the late 1700s, James Madison, the father of the American Constitution, stated that the difference in material possessions reflected a difference in personal abilities.

As the United States has shifted from an industry-based economy to one that is service or information-based, there has been a decline in high-paying jobs for factory workers. It is now much more difficult for the average worker to go "from rags to riches" in the United States, and many wonder what has happened to the traditional "American Dream." As the United States competes in a global economy, many workers are losing their old jobs and finding that they and their family members must now work longer hours for less money and fewer benefits. Faced with a decline in their standard of living, these people no longer believe that hard work necessarily brings great material rewards.

In understanding the relationship between what Americans believe and how they live, it is important to distinguish between idealism and reality. American values such as equality of opportunity and self-reliance are ideals that may not necessarily describe the reality of American life. Equality of opportunity, for example, is an ideal that is not always put into practice. In reality, some people have a better chance for success than others. Those who are born into rich families have more opportunities than those who are born into poorer families. Inheriting money does give a person a decided advantage. Many black

Americans have fewer opportunities than the average white American, and many women have fewer opportunities than men, in spite of laws designed to promote equality of opportunity for all individuals. And many immigrants today have fewer opportunities than those who came before them, when there were more high-paying factory jobs, and the economy was growing more rapidly.

The fact that American ideals are only partly carried out in real life does not diminish their importance. Many Americans still believe in them and are strongly affected by them in their everyday lives. It is easier to understand what Americans are thinking and feeling if we can understand what these basic traditional American values are and how they have influenced almost every facet of life in the United States.

FROM US SENATOR BERNIE SANDERS

In America today, the top 1 percent owns 38 percent of our country's financial wealth. The bottom 60 percent owns 2.3 percent. The increasing wealth inequality in the United States has become the great moral issue of our time.

In America today, one family, the Walton family of Wal-Mart, owns more wealth than the bottom 40 percent, and the top 400 individuals have more wealth than the bottom half of our country -- over 150 million people.

In terms of income, the top 1 percent earns more than the bottom 50 percent, while the wealthiest 16,000 Americans, who make more than

\$10 million a year (the top 0.01 percent), saw their income increase by nearly a third between 2011 and 2012.

According to a recent study, from 2009 to 2012, 95 percent of all new income went to the top 1 percent. Meanwhile, since 1999, median family income declined by more than \$5,000 after adjusting for inflation.

Today, a record-breaking 46.5 million people live in poverty in the United States. At 21.8 percent, we have the highest rate of childhood poverty in the industrialized world. One out of four of our kids now lives in a family that receives food stamps.

Poverty among seniors is growing. Over 9 percent of seniors lived in poverty in 2012, higher than in 2009. More American seniors were living in poverty last year than in 1972.

In recent years, while median family income has declined and poverty has increased, the number of millionaires and billionaires has grown at an extraordinary rate. In 1996, there were 121 billionaires in America. Today, there are 442”.