

Citizenship and the American Dream

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Dealing with the topic of American citizenship over the course of the past generation often has launched heated discussions about the influx of illegal immigrants into the country, their shadowy existence in American cities and participation in the workforce, and the controversial status of their continued presence. Legal, constitutional, and national security questions always abound, but an equally important consideration centers on why so many embarked on their occasionally perilous treks into the United States in the first place. In fact, most have been inspired by motives that propelled their forebears in the past, from the Pilgrims in Massachusetts Bay, to indentured servants in colonial Virginia, English adventurers in the 18th century, boatloads of German, Irish, and Italian peasants in the 19th century, along with multitudes of Asians and Spanish speakers in the 20th. They all arrived to flee from oppression, or to seek a better life, or both; in short, for nearly all comers, in the words of Hector de Crevecoeur, they traveled to go to a place where for the first time ever, their lives *meant* something.

Meant what? Following their own conceptions of what has since been characterized as *The American Dream*, which in its classic formulation has meant individuals' taking advantage of opportunities to work hard, advance themselves, and enjoy the fruits of their labors.¹ Our goal in the following pages is to explore how a number of notable American observers have characterized the American Dream, from the time of the Founding Fathers to the present. First,

¹ For recent treatments of this topic, consult Jim Cullen, *The American Dream* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), Cal Jillson, *Pursuing The American Dream* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 2004), and Jon Meacham, "Keeping the Dream Alive," *TIME*, June 21, 2012, Time Web site, <http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,2117662,00.html> (accessed July 2, 2012).

we shall explore the classic formulation of the American Dream and how its individual interpretations have been associated with corresponding social and political responsibilities. Second, we shall treat how understandings of the American Dream changed during the Progressive era, especially in terms of individual goals, from those centering on personal advancement to others that emphasized loyalty to some larger collectivity, the community, the nation, or the state. Further, we shall see that especially since the first Roosevelt Administration, while lip service continued to be paid to the classic conception, the active agency changed from individual initiative to governmental programs. Yes, while observers, persuaded by the classic view, threw their intellectual weight into the roles played by luck, pluck and individualism, more recent interpretations overwhelmingly relied on the power of the state. This change has transformed the meaning of citizenship and the American Dream.

Though the Puritans take first place in terms of chronology and sentimental drift—what American cannot conjure notions of Plymouth Rock, religious liberty, and a city on the hill at the mention of the word, Puritan?—our story begins with an American acquainted with both halves of the constitutional divide, Benjamin Franklin. Indeed, if it were somehow possible to draw the political equivalent of a blood sample from the American body politic during the eighteenth century, the resulting examination would probably test positive for the life and work of Benjamin Franklin. Although contributions from a variety of notable individuals during this period could match portions of Franklin’s experiences, none came close ever to rivaling the sum total of what this remarkable man accomplished during his long life. As noted by recent biographers, Franklin was the “First American,” according to H. R. Brands², and the “invention” of Benjamin Franklin paralleled “The Invention of America” in the words of Walter Isaacson.³ Further, drawing

² H. W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Anchor, 2000).

³ Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 2.

attention to the considerable time Franklin spent in England and France on behalf of the colonies and later the United States, Gordon Wood entitled his account *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*.⁴ In many ways, the growth of the American Republic as well as the American Dream followed the development of the “esteemed Dr. Franklin”; it is difficult to conceive of one without the others.

Thus, we have what might be termed, the Franklin test—the ultimate arbiter that allows one to evaluate all human endeavors. Does the activity in question contribute significantly to one’s self-improvement? Does your behavior redound to the benefit of others? Can you retire at the evening by answering satisfactorily the question, what good have I accomplished this day? Are you able to respond to inquisitors, not by citing who you are, but rather by pointing out how you have become a more virtuous person and improved the world as well? This is the Franklin test of the American Dream; it is a no-nonsense approach that emphasizes the importance of taking advantage of every opportunity every day of one’s life to engage in a program of self-improvement and service to others.

The result in Franklin’s case was his commitment to “the bold and arduous project of arriving at *moral perfection* [italics in original],” in an effort further to live a life “without committing any fault at any time, and to conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into.”⁵ Clearly, his version of the American Dream was not for the faint of heart; indeed, in *The Art of Virtue*, Franklin listed thirteen estimable qualities that he strove to practice each day of his life, in a checklist that comprised temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility. No sloucher, he: Franklin resolved to work on one virtue at a time, one week at a time, beginning

⁴ Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

⁵ Benjamin Franklin, *The Art of Virtue* (1784), US Gen Net Web site, <http://www.usgennet.org/usa/topic/preservation/bios/franklin/chpt6.htm> (accessed June 25, 2012).

with TEMPERANCE (*eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation*), and then to SILENCE (*speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation*), and then to ORDER, and the rest of the virtues, seriatim, until he had mastered them all without slacking off on any.

Though stringent, Franklin's moral athleticism included observations about how best to organize one's life for maximum accomplishment, and many have entered American folklore. Some came in the form of admonitions. Thus, in *The Way to Wealth*, Franklin observed: *Sloth, like rust, consumes faster than labor wears; while the used key is always bright*, as Poor Richard says. *But dost thou love life, then do not squander time, for that is the stuff life is made of*, as Poor Richard says.⁶ Most, however, were aimed at listeners in terms of positive reminders, such as *God helps those that help themselves; Diligence is the Mother of Good Luck*; and, the proverbial, *Early to Bed, early to rise, makes a Man healthy, wealthy, and wise*. Indeed, who among his readers, then or now, could argue with the good Dr. Franklin about these or any other of his pertinent sayings about working for one's own conception of the American Dream?

Throughout all this, Franklin was perspicacious enough to note that striving for individual perfection is not enough, and he warned that one should "be not uncharitable to those that at present seem to want it, but comfort and help them." In fact, any reading of Franklin's observations on religion conveys the impression that the whole point of his regimen of moral rectitude was to put an individual in a better position to serve others. Thus, in his *Autobiography*, Franklin inveighed against tendentious sermons that struck him as "very dry, uninteresting, and unedifying, since not a single moral principle was inculcated or enforc'd, their aim seeming to be

⁶ Benjamin Franklin, "The Way to Wealth," Swarthmore College Web site, <http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/bdorseyl/41docs/52-fra.html> (accessed June 25, 2012).

rather to make us Presbyterians than good citizens.”⁷ Indeed, Franklin looked askance at religious instruction that emphasized doctrine instead of actual behavior, preferring to conclude that the best way to serve God was to do good to one’s fellow citizens in this life. He took pride in avoiding “dogmatical” expressions and emphasized “vicious actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful.” In brief, no one exemplified the individual and social dimensions of pursuing the American Dream better than Benjamin Franklin.

All of which makes you a true American, according to J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur, a transplanted Frenchman (1735-1813), whose *Letters From an American Farmer* (1784) struck a responsive chord among all those whose lives had been transformed by their experiences in the New World. What is an American? Crevecoeur answered: “The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. This is an American.”⁸ Indeed, these “new men,” new citizens, should love their country, the United States, and reject those haughty European monarchies that smothered their subjects under centuries of social and political dross in the forms of kings, queens, nobles, governmental officials of all stripes, all legitimized by a bevy of bloated church functionaries and interlaced with archaic rules that strangled the lives of ordinary citizens and kept them mired in penury. But in America, “they rank as citizens” whose life’s prospects are limited only by individual talents, personal efforts, and one’s own imagination.

⁷ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P. F. Collier, 1909). Project Gutenberg eBook, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Gutenberg Web site, <http://gutenberg.net> (accessed June 25, 2012).

⁸ J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, University of Virginia Web site, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/CREV/letter03.html><http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/CREV/letter03.html> (accessed June 25, 2012).

Certainly Thomas Jefferson agreed, as he expressed in what could be styled as the American Dream's founding statement of purpose, the Declaration of Independence. Nowhere else can one find a fuller expression of the dreams, responsibilities, and duties for all those with courage to accept the challenges offered by that document's remarkable statement of American political thought. Certainly the "course of human events" limned by the Declaration has no peers in modern history, especially those parts that specify our country's founding principles: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." These few words embrace much of the American Dream's foundation, beginning with an epistemology—these truths are "self-evident," understood by all—and proceeding with assumptions that embrace equality and rights in the only place on earth where ordinary people had the liberty to be in charge of their own lives and pursue their own happiness, whether it be that of moral perfectionism, as was the case with Benjamin Franklin, or simply in acting on personal and family self-interest, a phenomenon appreciated and praised so much by Hector Crevecoeur and millions of others like him. No need for complicated verbal formulas to grasp this part of the Declaration; everyone understood what it meant.

With rights come duties, however, a point also understood by America's dreamers, movers, and shakers. It is the job of government to protect rights that pre-exist its creation—government has no other function, after all—and when it fails to do so, it is the duty of citizens "to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security."⁹ Jefferson himself, of course, is noted for his somewhat flippant attitude about having a revolution every generation or so to keep governments within their boundaries—much to the horror of his

⁹ Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*, Archives Web site, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html (accessed June 25, 2012).

principal collaborator, James Madison—but his larger point about citizens’ duties was well understood. Revolution aside, Jefferson insisted on the necessity of a well educated and informed citizenry as the foundation of every republic. In his *Second Inaugural Address*, after outlining some policy measures, Jefferson deferred to the “reflecting character of our citizens at large, who, by the weight of public opinion, influence and strengthen the public measures. It is due to the sound discretion with which they select from among themselves those to whom they confide the legislative duties.”¹⁰ Indeed, sound republics rest on the foundation of responsible citizens.

Certainly James Madison, the “father of the Constitution,” was committed to the same principle. James Madison was one of those rare individuals who began his career in national politics with the Declaration of Independence, served as a representative in the Continental Congress, struggled through the period of the Articles of Confederation, contributed indispensably to form a new constitutional government, worked as part of the loyal opposition as well as a member of the ruling party for two decades, was elected President of the new republic, and died in bed. All in all, not a bad track record for a Founding Father. Unfortunately, for Madison admirers, there are fewer public accolades for this most indispensable member of the founding generation than there are for, say, Jefferson, Washington, or Franklin. His self-effacing temperament may have had something to do with it: “You give me a credit to which I have no claim,” he protested in 1827 when Charles J. Ingersoll bestowed on him the title father of the Constitution.¹¹ Yet there is no doubt that Ingersoll was right. Without the perseverance, political skills, and sheer brilliance of a man dubbed by Washington Irving as a “withered little apple-

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson, *Second Inaugural Address* (1805), Bartleby Database, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres17.html> (accessed on June 25, 2012).

¹¹ Quoted in Marvin Meyers, ed., *The Mind of the Founders* (Hanover: The University Press of New England, 1981), 25.

john," it is hard to conceive that the Constitutional Convention could have achieved success in Philadelphia in 1787.¹²

So what did this “withered little apple-john father of the constitution” have to say about citizens’ virtues and duties? In words that echoed Franklin, Crèvecoeur, and Jefferson, Madison argued that the best “Republican Distribution of Citizens... would most favor health, virtue, intelligence and competency, in the greatest number of citizens. It is needless to add to these objects, liberty and safety.”¹³ That is, the composition of virtues and characteristics in the citizenry makes a considerable difference, especially regarding the weighty duties that Madison assigned to all true republicans (those committed to republican form of government): “Those who love their country, its repose, and its republicanism, will therefore study to avoid the alternative, by elucidating and guarding the limits which define the two governments, by inculcating moderation in the exercise of the powers of both, and particularly a mutual abstinence from such as might nurse present jealousies, or engender greater.”¹⁴ In brief, Madison warned that a vigilant citizenry constitutes an indispensable guard against the excesses of government, in order better to safeguard all those virtues here characterized as essential elements of the American Dream.

Several other prominent contributors to the American Dream, however, were convinced that threats to its realization came from quarters other than the schemes and ambitions of elected officials and their petty functionaries. Andrew Jackson, for instance, represented that vast amalgam of American citizens for whom Henry Clay’s expression of “self-made men” seemed most appropriate. Indeed, being born “of humble origins” constituted a badge of honor for most

¹² Quoted in Richard Hofstadter, William Miller, and Daniel Aaron, *The American Republic to 1865* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1959), 332.

¹³ James Madison, “Republican Distribution of Citizens,” in *Writings*, ed. Jack N. Rakove, 511 (New York: The Library of America, 1999).

¹⁴ Madison, *Writings*, 509.

individuals of accomplishment during the nineteenth century, and to this undeserved achievement Jackson added enough others to become a legend in his own day. Jackson burned through occupations like the hot pistol round that nearly made its way through his chest in a duel: he was a lawyer, land speculator, slave owner, horse trader, Indian fighter, Congressman, celebrated general who won the Battle of New Orleans, and all-around misanthrope, quick with his wit and temper, much to the chagrin of anyone who had to deal with him on a personal or professional basis. He literally made himself into what he eventually became, one of the most celebrated Presidents in the history of the republic, and also committed to the principle that no one—no white person, at least—should be deprived of pursuing the American Dream because of the nefarious machinations of a privileged elite.

Nowhere did he make this clearer than in his veto message of the Second National Bank of the United States, in a blustery feud that perhaps constituted the Presidential equivalent of the famous Gunfight at the OK Corral. It is not that Jackson hated all banks, or even the idea of a national bank; it is rather that this particular bank represented to him the embodiment of all that was threatening to the American Dream:

It is to be regretted that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes. Distinctions in society will always exist under every just government. Equality of talents, of education, or of wealth can not be produced by human institutions. In the full enjoyment of the gifts of Heaven and the fruits of superior industry, economy, and virtue, every man is equally entitled to protection by law; but when the laws undertake to add to these natural and just advantages artificial distinctions, to grant titles, gratuities, and exclusive privileges, to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers—who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their Government.¹⁵

¹⁵ Andrew Jackson, “Bank Veto Message,” Yale University Web site, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/ajveto01.asp (accessed July 2, 2012).

These comments represent the heart of Jackson's objections to this otherwise benign and extremely useful institution. Interestingly, had the bank in question been run by Jackson's own people, or at least by those whose backgrounds bore more similarity to his own, likely we would be deprived of his famous veto message and accompanying diatribe against the nefarious effects of privilege in a society filled with self-made individuals.

Which is as much to say, filled with persons who owed their success to no one but themselves and could credit their own imaginations, drive, and responsibilities for the attainment of whatever goals they wanted to achieve in life. Such was the advice of another great American dreamer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, in his essay "Self-Reliance," counseled every person to "Trust thyself: Every heart vibrates to that iron string."¹⁶ Indeed, Emerson's advice occasionally descended into a sort of moral solipsism, especially in his warning that "society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members," and "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist." The great thinker's radical individualism would brook no tolerance toward the blandishments of philanthropy, and his advice often radiates the me-generation scent of the 1960s. But it fit the 1840s, and many decades after that. It took a civil war to add an indispensable Lincolnian ingredient to Emerson's assertive statements about self-reliance and the American Dream.

Much of the time, however, Lincoln sounded just like Emerson, or certainly like Andrew Jackson. For instance, in a speech he delivered to an Ohio regiment during the Civil War, Lincoln proclaimed:

I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has. It is in order that each of

¹⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance," Emerson Central Web site, <http://www.emersoncentral.com/selfreliance.htm> (accessed July 2, 2012).

you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise, and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations.¹⁷

For all this stunning affirmation of the American Dream, Lincoln questioned the prospects of recently freed slaves to become socially the equals of their white brethren; rather it was his view that the institution of slavery was incompatible with a “nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” as he stated in his Gettysburg address. For that reason, that heinous institution had to be destroyed, and it was the intent of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments—the Civil War Amendments—to guarantee that constitutionally the federal government would not play favorites. Tragically, of course, those excluded from taking advantage of the American Dream had many obstacles to deal with over the course of the following century, and for some, to the present day.

In the meantime, the American Dream received what could be considered as perhaps its penultimate expression in a series of wildly popular books written over the course of forty years in the last third of the nineteenth century by an author whose name has since been identified with the American Dream, Horatio Alger. Indeed, the titles of his volumes themselves provide sufficient evidence of their principal themes: *Andy Grant's Pluck*; *Ben's Nugget: A Boy's Search for Fortune*; *Bound to Rise*; *Brave and Bold: The Fortunes of Robert Rushton*; *The Cash Boy*; *Chester Rand or The New Path to Fortune*—a selection just takes us through the “C’s.” His first and perhaps most popular novel was *Ragged Dick*, which appeared in serial form in 1867, in a book the following year, and launched his career as the country’s biggest and most well known booster of the American Dream. It’s not hard to see why. The main character in the novel, Richard Hunter, otherwise known as “Ragged Dick,” began his life’s trek as an orphan, homeless

¹⁷ Quoted in Cullen, *American Dream*, 74.

and friendless, reduced to shining shoes on the streets of New York City—hence, his early living as a “bootblack.” Through his own energy, frugality, and opportunism laced with propitious interjections of good luck, however, young Andy succeeded in life, because, as Alger’s narrator recounts, “He knew that he had only himself to depend upon, and he determined to make the most of himself—a resolution which is the secret of success in nine cases out of ten.”¹⁸

For many others, however, in a rapidly industrializing America after the Civil War, success held few secrets, and life seemed mostly a matter of surviving without the adventitious intervention of a few lucky breaks here and there, a plot point that defined Alger’s predictable narratives. The “long train of abuses” Thomas Jefferson lamented in the Declaration seemed more likely to proceed from one’s fellow dreamers than from anything King George or American governments could cook up, which meant that for Progressive reformers, realizing the American Dream required that the ideal be reformulated for an era where getting a leg up in the world meant working in a shop or factory—Raggedy Dick got his big break in a printer’s shop, after all, not on a farm—rather than striving for a few hundred acres and a clutch of farm animals. Plus, many thinkers around the turn of the century were convinced that previous conceptions of the American Dream were too individualistic, even mythical, to make sense in emerging corporate America; more expansive dimensions of the American Dream lurked over the horizon, and the classic concept of the American Dream seemed no longer relevant.

¹⁸ Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick*, Gutenberg Web site, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5348/pg5348.html> (accessed on July 2, 2012).

The Classic American Dream

The American Dream	Social Responsibilities	Political Duties
Character-building, Self-improvement (<i>Franklin</i>); Self-creation, become a “new man” (<i>Crevecoeur</i>); Pursuit of happiness (<i>Jefferson</i>); Preserve Liberty (<i>Madison</i>); Open opportunities for all (<i>Jackson</i>); Self-Reliance (<i>Emerson</i>); Equality of opportunity (<i>Lincoln</i>); Personal advancement (<i>Alger</i>).	Practice in life the “art of virtue,” comfort, and help others in need, use personal virtues to aid the community, serve God by doing good to man (<i>Franklin</i>); Education of all common people (<i>Jefferson</i>); practice citizen virtues (<i>Madison</i>); Challenge established elites (<i>Jackson</i>); Respect others’ equal opportunities (<i>Lincoln</i>); Be generous to the less fortunate (<i>Alger</i>).	Help other citizens (<i>Franklin</i>); Be grateful to your country (<i>Crevecoeur</i>); Abolish oppressive government, “Vigilant and distrustful superintendence” of government (<i>Jefferson</i>); Preserve constitutional government (<i>Madison</i>); Require government to treat all equally (<i>Jackson</i>); Keep alive the flame of liberty (<i>Lincoln</i>).

More than that, for some the classic conception was an object of scorn. Thus, in *Drift and Mastery*, Walter Lippmann abjured “a kind of mystical anarchism” that he attributed to a rival reformer who believed, “as most Americans do, in the unsophisticated man.”¹⁹ Lippmann berates his anonymous “reformer” because “He had the American dream, which may be summed up... in the statement that the undisciplined man is the salt of the earth.”²⁰ Lippmann and his progressive colleagues argued that the classic conception of the American Dream should no longer be regarded as an object of emulation, since it was the product of an era that believed in “the virtues of the spontaneous, enterprising, untrained, and unsocialized man,” a creature for which he had undisguised contempt.²¹

Herbert Croly, the dean of American progressives, went on to say that the preferred alternative to the American Dream, which he stated was “centralized power and responsibility...

¹⁹ Walter Lippmann, “Drift and Mastery,” in *The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism*, ed. Eldon Eisenach, 256 (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006).

²⁰ Lippmann, “Drift,” 256.

²¹ Lippmann, “Drift,” 256.

is injurious to certain aspects of traditional American democracy.”²² Then, so much the worse for tradition, because the modern world requires its own variety of “new Americans”—certainly not of the Franklin or Crevecoeur variety—and citizens as they are currently constituted are “morally and intellectually inadequate to a serious and consistent conception” of their responsibilities as democrats (believers and practitioners of democracy).²³ Perhaps even more telling was Croly’s insistence that American national democracy must be regarded as the “aggressor” against “self-interests and erroneous ideas”; which perhaps is another way of saying that an individual who clings to the classic conception of the American Dream either “gets with the program” or may be regarded as an enemy of the state, insofar as the state is regarded as the embodiment of Progressives’ national democracy.

This is the crux of the issue, of course, and the Progressives’ supercilious dismissal of the classic conception of the American Dream can best be understood in light of their transformed view of American democracy. No one expressed it better than John Dewey, who rejected the moral authority of such democratic practices as majority rule, because in his view it represented little more than a soupcon of numerical difference based on accidental accumulation of votes at a particular time. Rather than looking upon society and politics as a multitude of mechanistic interactions of discreet parts—something like a vast machine cranking along in perpetual motion—an approach he thought was hopelessly anachronistic, it was much more realistic to see the social and political whole in “organic” terms.

Without question, doing so effected a radical transformation in the conception and role of the citizen. As Dewey put it, “If... society be truly described as organic, the citizen is a member of the organism, and, just in proportion to the perfection of the organism, has concentrated within

²² Herbert Croly, “The American Democracy and Its National Principle,” in *The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism*, ed. Eldon Eisenach, 23 (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006).

²³ Croly, “National Principle,” 23.

himself its intelligence and will.”²⁴ His fellow Progressive and later President of the United States, concurred, especially with regard to how citizens should view the political system: “Government is not a machine,” Woodrow Wilson declared in *The New Freedom*, “but a living thing. It falls not under the theory of the universe [a mechanistic view], but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not Newton.”²⁵ And, one might add, metaphors aside, apparently not to the people.

This launches the question about just how the people and the American Dream fit into this scheme. Again, Dewey said it best: “The genuinely moral person is one, then, in whom the habit of regarding all capacities and habits of self from the social standpoint is formed and active. Such as one forms his plans, regulates his desires and hence performs his acts with reference to the effect they have upon the social groups of which he is a part.”²⁶ Mary Parker Follett, a Progressive in the mold of Jane Addams, took the group orientation a step further by insisting that the only kind of self that matters is the “group-self,” which manifests itself in a single communal force, the embodiment of which is the democratic state. Indeed, in *The New State*, her encomium to the Progressive movement, the classic conception of the American Dream gets swallowed up in the gigantic maw of the state’s collective will, in shades that bring to mind both Rousseau and Lenin.²⁷ Clearly, taking Progressive thought to its logical ends renders the classical view’s rather “Franklinesque” approach to the American Dream at best irrelevant and at most, dangerous. There’s very little wriggle room left for Crevecoeur’s “new man”; the advice of

²⁴ John Dewey, “Democratic Ethics,” in *The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism*, ed. Eldon Eisenach, 74 (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006).

²⁵ Woodrow Wilson, “The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People Speech,” Gutenberg Web site, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14811/14811-h/14811-h.htm> (accessed on July 5, 2012).

²⁶ Dewey, “Ethics,” 76.

²⁷ Mary Parker Follett, “The New State,” in *The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism*, ed. Eldon Eisenach, 33 (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006).

Jefferson and Madison is cast aside, the strictures of Jackson and Lincoln are magnified beyond their belief, and Emerson and Horatio Alger reduced to objects of derision.

So where did Dewey's "new moral man," Croly's "new democratic man," and Follett's "group-self" lead to in terms of understanding what's left of citizenship and the American Dream? Pretty much to Teddy Roosevelt's "New Nationalism," which further was expressed in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, and most recently, President Barack Obama's Life of Julia. Teddy Roosevelt himself was a sort of transitional figure, with feet planted on both sides of the American Dream's philosophical divide, between the classical conception and the Progressive view. On the classical side, TR sounded a lot like Andrew Jackson; on the Progressive side, a bit like John Dewey or Walter Lippmann. For instance, in 1910, the great trustbuster declared:

We grudge no man a fortune in civil life if it is honorably obtained and well used. It is not even enough that it should have been gained without doing damage to the community. We should permit it to be gained only so long as the gaining represents benefit to the community. This, I know, implies a policy of a far more active governmental interference with social and economic conditions in this country than we have yet had, but I think we have got to face the fact that such an increase in governmental control is now necessary.²⁸

In other words, Roosevelt's New Nationalism didn't simply advise or recommend successful seekers of the American Dream to pay heed to the needs of others, as, for instance, Benjamin Franklin did; he would *permit* success only if such "represents benefit to the community," and "require active governmental interference" to make sure classical American dreamers got the message. Gone are the warnings of Jefferson and Madison about keeping government within its boundaries; front and center appears Herbert Croly's "new democratic

²⁸ Theodore Roosevelt, "The New Nationalism," Presidential Rhetoric Web site, http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/roosevelt_theodore/newnationalism.html (accessed on July 5, 2012).

man,” who casts off the old skin of the classical conception of citizenry and the American Dream and instead takes “on the form of becoming [a] consistent, constructive, and aspiring nationalist....”²⁹ Indeed, TR once declared Croly’s *Promise of American Life* as one of the most significant books he ever read. In short, Progressive revisionism aimed at nothing less than reeducating the American people to an understanding of citizenship and the American Dream in terms defined by American national government. John Dewey’s “new moral man” was now in charge.

And this new moral man had a heavy agenda, as was outlined by Franklin D. Roosevelt in a speech that summarized over a generation of Progressive thought about the role of the state in defining the American Dream. In the fall of 1932, before the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, Roosevelt provided an overview of American political and economic development from the time of the founding through the first third of the 20th century, concluding that for the first century or so, the classical view of the American Dream and the conditions to which it was applied matched each other quite well. But the age of industrialization changed all that, bringing to the forefront a new set of challenges that required the sort of governmental activism that Teddy Roosevelt had in mind. And like his distant cousin, FDR gave lip service to the classical view of striving for the American Dream, although in a somewhat tepid way: “Our government... owes to everyone an avenue to possess himself a portion of that plenty sufficient for his needs, through his own work.”³⁰ Again, caveats are in order, because Roosevelt insisted also that the task of America is not producing more goods, creating more wealth, or summoning all Americans to pursue their versions of the American Dream, but rather the “more sober”

²⁹ Croly, “National Principle,” 22.

³⁰ Franklin Roosevelt, “Commonwealth Club Speech,” Teaching American History database, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=447> (accessed on July 6, 2012).

business of working with what has already been developed: “The day of enlightened administration has come,” he declared. Further, the purpose of government is to maintain a “balance, within which every individual may have a place if he will take it; in which every individual may find safety if he wishes it.” This, of course, does not exactly constitute a clarion call for greatness based upon individuals pursuing the American Dream.

In fact, the classic expression of the American Dream, which emphasized *individual* initiative for self-improvement, *individual* responsibility to come to the assistance of others, and *independent* citizens’ duties to monitor the excesses of government, is submerged or dismissed, in favor of John Dewey’s “new moral person” represented by the national government. It is difficult to overstate the significance of this transformation. After all, Crevecoeur’s and Horatio Alger’s many millions of acolytes weren’t striving on their own to achieve some kind of “balance”; nor did America’s classic dreamers seek to find their “place” in some larger scheme of things defined by Lippmann, Croly, Follett, Dewey, or Wilson. They pursued the American Dream, which was to work hard, uplift themselves, and reap the rewards of their sacrifices. The onset of the welfare state, beginning most seriously with the second Roosevelt Administration, changed all that. The active agency was no longer the individual American dreamer; it was the federal government.

President Lyndon Johnson’s “Special Message to The Congress: The American Promise,” delivered in March 1965 emphasized this point, with particular focus on the role of the chief executive. It was an impressive speech, perhaps the best of his career, even topping his “Great Society” address given the year earlier at the University of Michigan; he spoke of race relations, the right to vote, equality of opportunity, and human rights. But his peroration was most telling, citing his experience as a teacher thirty-five years earlier, and how he wished he could have done

more for a number of unfortunates who “never seemed to know why people disliked them.” Now, however, he was in a position to change all that:

I want to be the President who educated young children to the wonders of their world.

I want to be the President who helped to feed the hungry and to prepare them to be taxpayers instead of taxeaters.

I want to be the President who helped the poor to find their own way and who protected the right of every citizen to vote in every election.

I want to be the President who helped to end hatred among his fellow men and who promoted love among the people of all races and all regions and all parties.

I want to be the President who helped to end war among the brothers of this earth.³¹

Indeed, when it comes to fulfilling the American dream, the “I’s” have it, this time in the words of the President, speaking on his own behalf as well as that of the federal government. In fact, it was the job of the federal government to redistribute national resources in such a way that American dreamers were never very far from receiving assistance. The whole point of the modern state is to assume that pursuing the American Dream, at least for a major part of the population, is impossible without the federal government there to help. Whether or not this is a favorable development, of course, depends on one’s philosophy of government; but the considerable presence and impact of federal social programs, inconceivable for those committed to the classical perspective, cannot be doubted.

Nowhere is this point demonstrated more forcefully than in the Obama Administration’s “Life of Julia,” which was released as a campaign ad during the spring of 2012, and recounts the life story of a woman whose major life decisions are affected at a dozen crucial points from

³¹ President Lyndon B. Johnson, “Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise” (as delivered in person before a joint session), University of Texas Web site, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650315.asp> (accessed July 6, 2012).

childhood to old age by some government program.³² Thus, at age three she is enrolled in a Head Start program; from ages 17 through 42 Julia takes the SAT, receives a Pell Grant, undergoes surgery paid for by government-enforced insurance, enjoys a non-market-based student loan, “decides to have a child” insured by the Affordable Care Act, sees her son off to school (the father is not mentioned in the ad), and gets a Small Business Administration Loan for a web-design company that is guaranteed success through “equal pay for equal work” legislation. At sixty-five she enrolls in Medicare and at age sixty-seven retires, at which point she volunteers at a “community garden”—interestingly, not her *own* garden with her husband (who is never cited in this account), but some collectivist enterprise at the local level. Now to a Progressive, Julia has lived the American Dream, but for an individual committed to the classical conception, Julia represents a grotesque embodiment of Progressive bureaucracy’s imperious proclivities, with a whiff of totalitarianism thrown in for good measure. Julia is not a real person; she is a caricature who cannot seem to do anything on her own, much less face and overcome daunting challenges, work arduously to achieve her goals, and enjoy the fruits of her labors with her husband and family. The Progressive Julia has lived life in semi-dependency in a protective cocoon.

And a very expensive cocoon as well. The Heritage Foundation’s *2012 Index of Dependence on Government*, which summarizes much of the literature on government programs, reports that 91 million Americans receive some form of government assistance, in the categories of housing, health and welfare, retirement, education, and rural and agricultural services—the headings they use to construct their index. More disturbing for those committed to the classical concept of the American dream, “Per capita financial and non-financial support (adjusted to 2005 dollars) stood at about \$7,314 in 1962. By 2010, this support had grown to about \$32,748....

³² Obama Campaign, “Life of Julia,” Barack Obama Web site, <http://www.barackobama.com/life-of-julia/> (accessed July 8, 2012).

Extraordinarily, this amount was \$302 higher than the average per capita disposable income of Americans in 2010. Thus, a case can be made that a citizen is better off accepting government aid than working.”³³ The authors conclude their account by raising questions that Americans must face, including, for instance, whether they want to live in a country whose inhabitants are increasingly dependent on governmental assistance to live their lives, with the attendant deterioration of civil society and its prospects for those who wish to pursue the American Dream.

Further, additional data indicate that this dream has not become any easier for the less fortunate to pursue—for the Crevecoeurs, the Jacksons, and the Lincolns among us. For example, a 2011 study by John Silva concluded that “a rags to riches story was more likely to happen” from 1968 to 1980, when the second great Progressive push of social and economic legislation was being implemented, than it was from 1980 to 2009, after Great Society Programs started to have their very significant effects.³⁴ Again, this is an ominous sign for those whose imaginations are fired by the classical view of the American Dream.³⁵

This is not to say that the classical view has been completely buried in the dust by the Progressive juggernaut. Prominent twentieth-century Americans, especially presidents, have voiced their support of the classical view, including Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Dwight Eisenhower, Martin Luther King, Jr., and of course, Ronald Reagan. King stands out particularly

³³ William W. Beach and Patrick D. Tyrrell, *The 2012 Index of Dependence on Government* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2012), 25. Available at https://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2012/pdf/sr104.pdf (accessed July 8, 2012).

³⁴ John Silva, “Economic Mobility: Is ‘Rags to Riches’ Still Possible?” Ritholtz Weblog entry posted November, 2011, <http://www.ritholtz.com/blog/2011/11/economic-mobility-is-‘rags-to-riches’-still-possible/> (accessed July 8, 2012).

³⁵ The literature on economic mobility is enormous. See, for instance, “Stalled Social Mobility in America,” which has many references, Congressional Budget Web site, <http://socialcapital.wordpress.com/category/congressional-budget-office/> (accessed July 8, 2012); Brookings Institution, “Economic Mobility: Is the American Dream Alive?” Brookings Institute Web site, <http://www.brookings.edu/views/papers/sawhill/200705.pdf> (accessed July 8, 2012); United States House of Representatives, House Budget Committee, “A Deeper Look at Income Inequality November 17, 2011,” House of Representatives Budget Committee Web site, <http://budget.house.gov/uploadedfiles/cboinequality.pdf> (accessed July 8, 2012); and, the “Economic Mobility Project,” Pew Research Web site, <http://www.pewstates.org/projects/economic-mobility-project-328061> (accessed July 8, 2012).

with his iconic “I Have a Dream Speech,” whose most telling comment was about being judged by the content of one’s character instead of the color of one’s skin—a glowing tribute to equal opportunity. But it has been Reagan especially who has fired the imaginations of those committed to the classical version of the American Dream, with the testimony of his life, and of course, through a plethora of inspiring speeches. As Hugh Heclo has pointed out, “The important point is not that Reagan ever said anything fundamentally new, but that in the new context created by the Sixties, Reagan continued to uphold something old.”³⁶ And somehow, Ronald Reagan always seemed to make the old and traditional stand out as immediately relevant and fresh.

Consider, for instance, his Independence Day speech in 1987, where he declared that “we’re still Jefferson’s children,” and that “freedom is not created by government, nor is it a gift from those in political power.” Rather, in a direct slap against the Progressive view, “It [freedom] is, in fact secured, more than anything else, by those limitations... that are placed on those in government.” More than that, Reagan took a page from FDR’s script and turned it to his own purposes in defining the American dream, by citing his version of the four freedoms:

First, the freedom to work—to pursue one’s livelihood in one’s own way, to choose where one will locate and what one will do to sustain individual and family needs and desires.... Second of those freedoms is the freedom to enjoy the fruits of one’s labor—to keep for oneself and one’s family the profit or gain earned by honest effort. Third is the freedom to own and control one’s property.... Fourth is the freedom to participate in a free market—to contract freely for goods and services and to achieve one’s full potential without government limits on opportunity, economic independence, and growth.³⁷

All of which constituted a project of *restoration*, in Reagan’s view, in light of the developments that had taken place over the course of the previous several generations. In fact, Reagan took

³⁶ Quoted in Jillson, *Pursuing Dream*, 239.

³⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks Announcing America’s Economic Bill of Rights Speech” (July 3, 1987), University of Texas Web site, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/070387a.htm> (accessed July 10, 2012).

great delight in tweaking his speeches with references that predated the Progressive movement. You want to cite FDR? he as much as asked his liberal opponents. Fine, I'll cite Jefferson. No problem, he would say with a wink and a nod; I knew him personally, and this is what he told me. You've got Herbert Croly? I'll see your Croly and raise you a Lincoln. While you're at it, throw in John Winthrop.

Certainly, it was the Puritan John Winthrop's famous phrase that Reagan transformed into his signature reference—a city on a hill—and by doing so brought attention to another aspect of the classical view of the American Dream, which is the conviction of American exceptionalism.³⁸ A theme that runs consistently through the writings of classical dreamers is that America is *not* like Europe, or like any other place on earth. Traditionalists believe that Ronald Reagan had it right when he quoted Abraham Lincoln's words about America being the last best hope of earth and not just another holding pen for some oppressive or overbearing government's hapless subjects. It has seemed to many traditionalists that while their Progressive opponents wish to emulate other “advanced industrialized countries,” the fact that, say, France or Germany has this or that policy strikes adherents to Reagan's view as an excellent reason not to follow suit.

Which means in the final analysis that the American Dream needs no further elaboration, just a restatement of its traditional themes—hard work, personal responsibility, diligent pursuit of one's goals, grateful appreciation of one's labors, helping others who benefit from such help, and keeping watchful eye on privileged elites in and outside of government who would stifle others from bettering themselves and their families. Benjamin Franklin understood those matters—indeed, he defined them—while many millions of his intellectual progeny continue in

³⁸ A convenient source of Reagan's speeches is <http://reagan2020.us/>. His “We Shall Be a City Upon a Hill” speech may be found at http://reagan2020.us/speeches/City_Upon_A_Hill.asp (accessed July 10, 2012). This speech was presented at the first Conservative Political Action Conference in 1974.

the more difficult circumstances of the 21st century to follow his lead. We're not like others, our founders proclaimed; nor should we aspire to be so. We must, as Crèvecoeur insisted, simply be Americans and live our lives as Americans. Because this, after all, is the American Dream.