

In search of the American Dream

Every American understands the meaning of the words 'the American Dream'. It has become an important part of American identity. No other country has a national dream. For hundreds of years people from far away have come to North America to find a better life. Today the Dream seems to mean that anything is possible¹ if you want it badly enough. But there is not just one American Dream and its meaning has changed.

The Puritans and the first American Dream

The Puritans who came to New England in 1630 had a dream. In England they had been well-educated and rich and they were members of the Anglican Church. However, they did not agree with how the Church practiced religion. Although they believed that the world was not a good place, they knew they could change it. So they left behind their comfortable lives in England on a mission. For these first Puritans change was starting a new life and giving their children a better future. This was the heart of the first American Dream.

They hoped the New World would become an example for the Old World. But many of the Puritans were not tolerant people. They believed God was only working for them and they expected people to join their church and respect its authority. In some places only those who were members of the new Church were allowed to vote. So in the beginning there were many fights with Indians and other settlers with different dreams about how to make their lives better.

The promises of the American Revolution

By 1776 the new Americans had lived in the thirteen colonies for more than 150 years, but they did not have their own government. The British still took taxes² from them and had authority over them. In the American Revolution

the colonists fought for their freedom³. After they had won the war and become independent, the Founding Fathers of the United States wrote the Declaration of Independence, which promised that 'all men are created equal⁴' and all men have the right to 'life, liberty⁵ and the pursuit⁶ of happiness.'

Like the Puritans these Americans hoped for a better life and their dream was freedom to live how they wanted. Although the new United States was the most equal society⁷ in the world for white men, the rights⁸ in the Declaration of Independence were only for some people. White men had the right to vote and make decisions and they had the freedom to own black slaves⁹. Black people, women and Indians were not part of the Dream.

Dreaming of equality

The first black slaves arrived in North America in the early 17th century. More than two hundred years later President Abraham Lincoln finally made them free, but he did not make blacks and whites equal. Until the 1950s African Americans and white Americans were segregated – blacks were not allowed to go to the same schools as white people; they could not sit together on buses; and they could not eat in the same restaurants. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke for African-Americans when he said "I have a dream." His dream was that the American Dream in the Declaration of Independence would mean equality for people of *all* skin colors. One day all Americans would have equality of opportunity¹⁰: Everybody would have the same chances whether they are black or white, rich or poor.



¹possible ['pɒsəbl] möglich • ²tax [tæks] Steuer • ³freedom ['fri:dəm] Freiheit • ⁴equal ['i:kwəl] gleich • ⁵liberty ['lɪbətɪ] Freiheit • ⁶pursuit [pə'sju:t] Streben • ⁷society [sə'saɪətɪ] Gesellschaft • ⁸right [raɪt] Recht • ⁹slave [slɛv] Sklave • ¹⁰opportunity [ˌɒpə'tju:nəti] Gelegenheit

Dream of the good life

Since the days of the Puritans the meaning of the American Dream has changed from freedom and equality to a more material happiness, but the Dream has always been about a better life. Many Americans believe that anybody who wants a better life can have it if they work hard enough and think positively. They love 'rags-to-riches' stories about real people who have 'made it big'. For example, the 2006 film *The Pursuit of Happyness* tells the true story of Chris Gardner who was sometimes homeless and even in jail before he became one of the richest and most successful African-Americans on Wall Street. When he was finally given a chance, he worked without pay for many months and had to show that he was good enough for the job.

After World War II Americans typically worked hard so they could become homeowners in the suburbs and buy cars or a TV. Soon, however, they began to watch as movie stars in sunny California enjoyed their fame and luxury. Stars have bought bigger and bigger dream homes with swimming pools and huge backyards. They own expensive cars, planes and vacation homes. They seem to have an easier life, and more and more 'normal' Americans want that life. Like the



people who went to California to find gold in the 19th century, many Americans today hope to 'strike it rich' in the lottery or gambling¹¹ in Las Vegas. Teenagers and adults also try to become rich and famous in reality TV shows like *American Idol* or *Big Brother*. It's no longer necessarily about skill or hard work.

But is the American Dream still possible? In a weak American economy¹² many Americans are losing jobs and homes and they have less money to do the things that they enjoy. Large numbers of people are afraid of losing everything and they believe that their lives and their children's future will not improve even if they work harder. Once upon a time America was 'the Promised Land' for people all over the world. But is the American Dream now available only for the lucky few?

1 Understanding the Dream

a) Put the name of the people next to their dream.

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1. fame and luxury | a) Puritans |
| 2. freedom to practice their religion and create a better life | b) Founding Fathers |
| 3. anything is possible if you work hard enough | c) African-Americans |
| 4. equal rights and opportunities for all groups of people | d) Hollywood stars |
| 5. freedom from England and the right to live how they wanted | e) Chris Gardner and Vince Papale |

b) Correct the sentences.

1. Americans are not the only ones with a national dream.
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2. All Americans had the same rights after the American Revolution.
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3. If you don't work hard, you can't have the American Dream.
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4. People know that material things can't make them happy.
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¹¹gambling [ˈɡæmblɪŋ] Glücksspiel • ¹²economy [iˈkɒnəmi] Wirtschaft

2 American phrases

Say what the following phrases mean.

1. All men are created equal. _____
2. pursuit of happiness _____
3. equality of opportunity _____
4. rags-to-riches _____
5. to strike it rich _____

3 A 'German Dream'?

What kind of life do Germans dream of? Make a list of things they would like to have or experience in their lives.

4 Becoming a star

'American Idol' is a TV show for people who want to become pop stars. The best singer becomes famous (usually). In 'Big Brother' people live in a house together for many weeks. The public vote and the most popular person wins – and hopes to become rich and famous.

Would you go on 'American Idol' or 'Big Brother'? Why or why not?

Lösungen

1

- a) 1. d)
2. a)
3. e)
4. c)
5. b)
- b) 1. America is the only country with a national dream.
2. Black people, women and Indians did not have the same rights as white men.
3. The American Dream is no longer about skill or hard work, but about becoming rich and famous, e. g. in reality TV shows.
4. Americans think that rich people have an easier life.

2

1. Everybody is born with the same rights.
2. the search for a good / happy life
3. All people should have the same opportunities in life.
4. to start out with nothing and become very rich
5. to suddenly get a lot of money

3**Possible ideas:**

- having a family
- finding a safe job
- building a house
- going on vacation several times a year
- winning the lottery
- travelling the world
- being famous
- driving an expensive car (made in Germany, of course)

4

I wouldn't go on 'American Idol' or 'Big Brother', or on any other reality TV show. People who go on such shows do this because they hope to become rich and famous, but normally this doesn't happen. Even if you win one of these shows you will be forgotten after a few months and the money you get will be gone sooner or later.