

Basiswissen

Freedom and Justice – Myths and Realities

Concepts of the American Dream

The USA

The USA was – and still is – a country of unlimited opportunities, where people can work their way “from rags to riches”. It has attracted millions of both legal and illegal immigrants over the centuries, who hoped to find a better life there without the kind of persecution or obstacles they had to face in their home countries.

Keyword:

The American Dream: There is no single definition of what the American Dream actually is, as it varies for each and every American. The term was first used by James Truslow Adams, an American historian, in his book *The Epic of America*, in 1931: “[The] American Dream [is] the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.”

In the following pages we are going to take a look at some of the key concepts generally associated with the American Dream, many of which are often touched upon in political speeches.

Please note that these key concepts often overlap and are closely related.

Freedom

The first thing many immigrants saw when they came by ship to New York City during the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, was the Statue of Liberty, which is located on Liberty Island.

The Statue of Liberty

- given to the USA as a gift from France in 1886, to celebrate the first 100 years of American independence from Britain (the centennial)
- a robed woman, holding a lit torch in her right and a tablet in her left hand, showing the date of the Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776)
- underneath her right foot the remains of broken shackles can be seen
- one of the most famous American icons, symbolizing enlightenment, independence, liberty and freedom
- the theme of Emma Lazarus’ famous poem “The New Colossus” (1883), which can be seen on a bronze plaque inside the statue
- located in Upper New York Bay, just like Ellis Island

Ellis Island

- the place where most immigrants first set foot on American soil
- an island of hopes but also an island of tears for a number of immigrants, as some of them were detained there for legal or medical reasons or even sent back to their home countries
- the gateway to a new – better – life for the majority of immigrants
- a federal immigration station from 1892 to 1954

The Puritans

The Puritans’ beliefs and values had a lasting impact on New England society:

- towards the end of the 16th century some English Protestants felt that Protestantism in England was not much different from Catholicism
- decided to leave England, seeking their luck elsewhere
- first settled in Holland (1608), but moved back to England
- wished to remain English subjects but free to worship God the way they wanted to
- intention: to purify the Church of England, not to leave it
- September 1620: a group of 102 people left England for America, sailed on a ship called the Mayflower, arrived in America 65 days later, in a bay they called Plymouth Bay.

The New Canaan

In the Bible Canaan was the land God promised to the Israelites. God ordered Moses to lead the people from captivity in Egypt to Canaan – “a land of milk and honey”. America sees itself in this tradition. The idea of America as the “New Canaan”, the land of milk and honey, is closely linked to the idea of “manifest destiny”.

Manifest Destiny/The Frontier

Manifest Destiny

The term “Manifest Destiny” was coined by the American journalist John L. O’Sullivan in 1839:

- stands for the belief that America is the one nation ordered by God to expand across the North American continent
- *The Great Nation of Futurity* by John L. O’Sullivan: “[America is] the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement.” According to him the American people have been chosen “... to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man – the immutable truth and beneficence of God.”¹
- America = a country that is superior to all other countries
- stresses virtue of the American people, as they are the ones to establish moral rules and values across the globe.

¹ aus: “The Great Nation of Futurity,” *The United States Democratic Review*, Volume 6, Issue 23, pp. 426–430.

American patriotism is deeply rooted in the concept of “Manifest Destiny”. The concept of “Manifest Destiny” is closely linked to the concept of the frontier.

The frontier

- the expansion of the American nation from coast to coast, pushing the borderline between civilization and wilderness further and further back
- Pacific coast was reached in the 2nd half of the 19th century
- after this mission new challenges – new frontiers – were needed, e.g. space exploration (in particular the moon landing in 1969), scientific and technological progress

Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness

Declaration of Independence

- written in 1776 by Thomas Jefferson
- all American citizens are created equal: “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.”
- possibility for every American (at first, women were excluded from this definition) to lead his/her life the way he/she wants to, making his/her own personal dreams come true
- stresses the rights of the individual, while at the same time taking the rights of others into consideration
- 1776: the thirteen colonies declared their independence from England, and were, therefore, at war with England
- Declaration of Independence questioned the rights of the British king, George III, in that it stated that everyone was created equal (quite revolutionary at the time)
- The fact that the new American government was to be radically different from that of the British king was pointed out in the preamble to the American constitution.

American Constitution

- written in 1787
- new ideas of a democratic state stated in the **preamble** of the constitution: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union², establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

Bill of Rights

first ten amendments to the American Constitution

- threaten everyone’s ability to achieve personal freedom and the pursuit of happiness
- First Congress of the United States originally proposed twelve amendments in 1789, ten of which were added to the constitution as a preamble
- amendments known as the Bill of Rights
- guarantee America’s citizens certain inalienable rights, e.g. freedom of religion, freedom of speech and the press as well as the right to bear arms

The American Dream today

Keywords:

Multicultural society: a society where various ethnic groups and their cultural heritage are accepted in their own right

Salad bowl: the various ethnicities living in the United States adding their own traditions, cultural values, etc. to the American people; the various heritages do not merge into one, but stay distinct (“unity in diversity”)

Melting pot: the various ethnic groups do not retain their cultural heritage but amalgamate into one new nation

The term first appeared in an essay by Jean de Crèvecoeur entitled “Letters from an American farmer” in 1782.

The term “salad bowl” is now considered to be more politically correct.

- The American Dream itself has come to be seen more critically.
- A considerable number of critics regard the American Dream as an illusion, as not everyone has access to the possibilities usually associated with it.
- Examples of American nightmares are the Vietnam War, September 11, 2001, and the financial crisis starting in 2008.

The Present Economic Situation in the US

The question whether the American Dream is still alive today is one which cannot be answered with either “yes” or “no”, as the concept of the American Dream is not static. It depends on several aspects, e.g. a person’s individual definition of and belief in the concept of the American Dream and the point of view one takes.

With regard to the present economic situation in the US, it is often said that the American Dream has been shattered for many people. The financial crisis that began in

citizens, and for many years getting a loan necessary to build or buy a house was not difficult, even for people without a steady or with a low income. This resulted in people taking bigger loans than they could actually afford. They hoped that in the worst case of not being able to pay back the loan, they could still sell their houses, thereby making a profit.

In most cases paying back the loan was not a problem as long as the mortgage rates were low.

When the base rate (*Leitzinsen*) increased, many house owners had difficulties paying back their loans. As a consequence, a huge number of houses suddenly had to be sold, which lowered the price, as there was also a decline in demand. In some cases that actually meant that the price for which a house could be sold was lower than the house owner's loan. So instead of making a profit, selling a house in many cases meant incurring a loss.

In the meantime, the banks had started to speculate with their customers' loans. Loans of good, average and bad credit rating were combined into so-called "Mortgage Backed Securities" (MBS). By combining loans of different credit ranking, banks hoped to limit the risk if someone failed to pay back a loan. These "Mortgage Backed Securities" were then sold to other banks worldwide, which meant profit for the seller. This practice went well for several years, but when more and more house owners could not pay back their loans, their banks started to lose large sums of money.

On 15th September 2008, one of America's biggest banks, Lehman Brothers, crashed. This marked the beginning of a series of bank crashes.

Unemployment increased and as many Americans had less money to spend, this led to a drop in consumption as well.

The burst of the housing bubble did not remain an American problem for long. It soon affected the economy of other countries, among them Germany, the Benelux countries and Iceland. Government bailouts for banks and economic stimulus plans were decided and put into action. Nevertheless, many countries were hit by recession.

In 2018, the US economy is still recovering from the economic crisis of 2008. Unemployment has dropped from its highest level of 10% in October 2009 to just under 5.0% (March 2017).³

In November 2012, Barack Obama won the presidential elections once more. For both major parties in the US, economic growth and an increase in the number of jobs are top issues, although their approaches are quite different. Whereas getting a loan was relatively easy in the past, Americans intending to buy or build a house today face great difficulties, as banks are reluctant to grant loans to private persons.

On November 8, 2016 entrepreneur and TV personality Donald John Trump, candidate for the Republican Party won the U.S. presidential elections against Hillary Clinton, the wife of former US president Bill Clinton.

With pollsters nationwide seeing Clinton in the lead, Trump's victory came as something of a surprise.

Born on June 14, 1946 into a family successful in real estate and construction, Trump made a fortune in real estate and the entertainment business. On January 20, 2017 he was inaugurated as the 45th president of the USA; he is the first American president who has never held any political or military office.

Prior to his election Trump had been criticized as a populist, nationalist and misogynist. He promised his voters to put "America first". One of his aims was building a wall along America's southern borders to keep illegal Mexican immigrants from entering the country. According to Trump, Mexico should pay for this wall. He also promised his voters to create 25 million new jobs in the next ten years. His inauguration was followed by massive protests worldwide, e.g. the Women's March on Washington to promote equal rights and counter discrimination, as well as to address racial inequities.

Donald Trump is known for his obsession with social micro blogging platform Twitter. There he frequently utters his opinion on various issues. His tweets often tend to be rather impulsive and emotional.

As his sometimes controversial statements and decisions are frequently criticized by the media, he considers himself to be "at war with the media", which he accuses of being biased to his disadvantage.

In the days after his inauguration, Trump signed several important executive orders, attempting to end Obamacare, a healthcare reform law that aimed to improve health insurance and make it affordable for everyone, and another seeking to withdraw the USA from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal. However, he could not keep his campaign promise to put a stop to Obamacare. Instead he was advised to withdraw the bill, as there were not enough votes in Congress in favour of it.

In addition to that, he signed an executive order preventing Muslims from Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen from entering the United States. This caused a storm of protest and Trump's immigration ban was quashed by the courts.

Political leaders in countries worldwide view his presidency with mixed emotions, especially since Trump at the beginning regarded NATO as obsolete (he has already changed opinion) and has praised the United Kingdom for leaving the European Union.

On June 1, 2017, Trump announced that the USA would withdraw from the Paris

The USA's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement sparked international criticism and made the country the only one not to be part of the agreement. As an answer to Trump's announcement, a number of US states formed the US climate alliance, aiming to uphold the aims of the Paris climate agreement. On April 23, 2018, Michael Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York promised to pay \$4.5 million to cover some of the USA's debt to the Paris climate agreement. On TV network CBS Bloomberg explained the reasons for his donation by pointing out that "America made a commitment and, as an American, if the government's not going to do it then we all have a responsibility".

Glossary – Freedom and Justice

assimilation	Assimilation; Angleichung an Bestehendes
base rate	Leitzinsen
civil disobedience	bürgerlicher Ungehorsam
Civil Rights Movement	die Bürgerrechtsbewegung
credit rating	Beurteilung der Kreditwürdigkeit, Bonitätsbeurteilung
cultural heritage	Kulturerbe; kulturelles Erbe
Declaration of Independence	Unabhängigkeitserklärung
discrimination; deprivation	Benachteiligung; Diskriminierung
drop in consumption	Konsumrückgang
E pluribus unum	lat.: aus vielen Eines; ursprünglich bezogen auf die verschiedenen Staaten, aus denen die USA bestehen; heute vielmehr bezogen auf die vielen ethnischen Gruppen und Volksgruppen, aus denen sich die Bevölkerung der USA zusammensetzt
economic stimulus plan	Konjunkturprogramm
entrepreneur	Unternehmer
equality; equal opportunities	Gleichheit; gleiche Chancen
fame	Ruhm
freedom; ~ of speech; ~ of the press; religious ~	Freiheit; Redefreiheit; Pressefreiheit; Religionsfreiheit
frontier	Grenze (zwischen Zivilisation und

identity	Identität
Immigration Act	Einwanderungsgesetz
"In God we trust"	Wir vertrauen auf Gott; offizieller Wahlspruch der USA
inauguration; inaugural speech	Amtseinführung; Amtsantrittsrede
liberation	Befreiung
loan	Darlehen
melting pot vs. salad bowl	„Schmelztiegel“ vs. „Salatschüssel“ (unterschiedliche Konzepte, die die Vielfalt unterschiedlicher Kulturen in den USA charakterisieren)
mortgage	Hypothek
multiculturalism	Multikulturalität
naturalisation	Einbürgerung
pioneer; pioneer spirit	Pionier; Pioniergeist
Promised Land; the land of milk and honey; God's own country; the New Canaan	das gelobte Land
recession	Rezession
refugee; refugee camp	Flüchtling; Flüchtlingslager
segregation; desegregation	Rassentrennung; Aufhebung der Rassentrennung
success	Erfolg
supply and demand	Angebot und Nachfrage
the housing bubble	die Immobilienblase
the pursuit of happiness	das Streben nach Glück
to achieve financial security	finanzielle Sicherheit erlangen
to attain self-fulfillment	sich selbst verwirklichen
to be persecuted; religious/political persecution	verfolgt werden; religiöse/politische Verfolgung
to go from rags to riches; from dishwasher to millionaire	vom Tellerwäscher zum Millionär
to immigrate; immigrant; immigration; an influx of immigrants	einwandern; Einwanderer; Einwanderung; Zustrom von Einwanderern
to incur a loss	(einen) Verlust machen
to pledge allegiance to the flag	den Fahneid leisten