

**The American Dream is alive but under the weather**

**By Curtis Seltzer**

**BLUE GRASS, Va.**—The American Dream is in the news these days as presidential candidates squabble over who can best provide more of it to the most Americans in the shortest amount of time for the longest number of years cheaper than the other guys.

As a non-observant observer of our long-running political comedy, I realized that I had never brought The American Dream into focus. What was it? What is it today?

People who came to America willingly sought cheap land, opportunities and more freedom.

I never talked about The American Dream with my immigrant grandparents, but I think they would have said they came here to get away from there and have a chance at a better life. They didn't find the streets paved with gold, but they did find them paved. They felt they "movin' on up."

I never talked about The American Dream with my parents, but I think they would have defined it as something better than what they started with, which was not much more than nothing, and also something better than that for their only child.

I never talked about The American Dream with friends in college and graduate school, either about what it was or how to get it. Much time, on the other hand, was spent talking about what it wasn't and how not to get trapped by it.

I never talked about The American Dream with my daughter, because she would have asked, "What do you know?" An always valid point.

Talking about The American Dream seemed a little gauche, because it had often come to be thought of as no more than dollars, their pursuit and their expressions. People who amassed big piles were thought to have captured more of The American Dream than those who landed on the far shore with only a couple of chips to show for their time onboard.

A big pile mattered more than how the dollars had been heaped up and what a person did with them. The end, not the means, counted most on the permanent record card.

Lately, The American Dream had been shrunk to home ownership, or at least, owning an adjustable-rate mortgage on a house that would be yours in 30 years if nothing bad happened and the rate didn't rise.

All candidates for all offices have learned the value of carrying The American Dream into their election fights. And there's nothing wrong with that, if only we shared an understanding about what it meant.

While both Democrat and Republican presidential candidates agree that each of us has less of The American Dream today than in the past, I draw comfort from their universal promise that, if elected, each of us will get more of it in the future as long as we follow a set of policies that all the other candidates oppose.

So whatever The American Dream is, all Americans are in line for an increase after the election. Even if the pie doesn't get bigger, each of us will get a bigger slice. This is the new geometry, which American children are having difficulty mastering.

The American Dream has been described in different ways over the years. These ideas, I think, boil down to a simple set of goals: more and better for me, more and better for my kids, and, if there's no contradiction, more and better for everyone else.

The means to get to these goals usually include hard work, play by the rules, do unto others., freedom to act and equal opportunity.

Our assumption was that if we work the means, we get the ends. That assumption no longer holds for many of us.

The right-of-center position on The American Dream is that government -- through intrusion, regulation and taxation -- has limited the ability of ordinary Americans to seek more and better and, hence, to get it. Government, in other words, is limiting the pie's growth and decreasing the size of everyone's slice.

The left-of-center position is that the world economy and environmental concerns have forced Americans to think differently about more and better. Pursuit of life-quality goals should take up some portion of the space we historically allotted to more. Less may not be more, but it can be better. Government, not the unfettered market, is the only institution capable of shaping the transition to a redefined American Dream.

I'm inclined to agree with parts of both positions, and not because I'm both wishy and washy.

Economies are so complicated today that it's impossible to return to an "Edenic" vision of a simple free market when the absence of federal regulation allowed a stone-cold, white-collar criminal like John D.

Rockefeller to build an oil monopoly by cheating, stealing and price manipulations—and erect himself as a totem of The American Dream.

On the other hand, it's clear that some regulations are too burdensome, make us uncompetitive and add cost without corresponding benefit.

The harder question, I think, is whether a better American Dream can be found in an American pie that grows slower and where most Americans wind up with a slower-growing-and-different-kind-of slice than they once had.

Some will think that this question is heresy. I think it's in the cards, and there's not much we can do about it, except adapt creatively.

I think most Americans understand that The American Dream can no longer just be about piling up more dollars than your friends. A broader goal should be a better fit with the old hokey means -- play by the rules, do unto others, etc. etc. -- the means we call, ethics.

When I said something like this at a conference of money guys, they dismissed it out of hand. "How can we compete if we play by the rules, but our competitors don't?" That's a fair question. Start small, I said. Expect mirrored behavior. Shun the do-badders.

I'm very good at bringing comic relief to serious discussions.

And in that vein, would it be too much to expect a real debate this election year on what The American Dream means today and how we, individually and collectively, should go about pursuing it in the future?

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