

ESSAY A
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“When I was your age, I had to walk up a giant hill for two miles to get to school every day, even in the snow...” I have heard my grandfather tell this story many times, often when my sisters and I are complaining or being ungrateful for what we have. This small story that I know by heart not only shows my family history but shows American history: how over a span of only two generations the country we live in has dramatically evolved. My grandfather mentions how he would have never imagined where he is in life today: where he lives, how he lives, and the world he lives in have altered slowly but significantly since he was in elementary school. He grew up and became part of the change himself, epitomizing what it means to be an American. America is a country that is constantly changing, made up of an assortment of people- young and old, rich and poor, male and female- who bring about these changes because they are inevitably linked together as citizens of one nation which develops as a whole.

America is a blend, an opportunity, the culmination of hard work, and the product of optimism. This definition can be called the American Dream, a term which was coined in the 1930s representing

“that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement...a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Library of Congress).

The American Dream draws people to America with its use of umbrella terms and positive language; it shows that there is always an opportunity to improve and get better. This definition also allows the Dream to change with the country: the use of words and phrases like “everyone,” “according to ability,” and “innately capable” have altered in meaning since the 1930s. The American Dream was, and is often still associated with, a happily married white heterosexual couple with children standing in front of a suitably sized house with a white picket fence. In this

scene, the husband is the bread winner and he makes an income the family can live off of without any financial stress. Yet as American social norms changed, as more immigrants were drawn to America because of this Dream, the view of the American Dream changed. No longer did you have to be a white couple, no longer did you have to be married or have children, no longer did the husband have to be the breadwinner, and no longer did the couple have to be heterosexual. “Everyone” became all races, genders, sexualities, and ages instead of middle aged white males, the “ability” and “innate capability” of African-Americans and women was recognized as equal to that of whites and males. These changes occurred in a time gap of less than 100 years, a relatively short amount of time when discussing the history of America, which are possible because “life in the United States offered personal liberties and opportunities to a degree unmatched by any other country in history—a circumstance that remains true today...[the] invigorating sense of possibility, though it is too often taken for granted, is the great gift of Americanness” (Kamp). This definition would not have been made or even expanded if not for the diversity of the citizens of an opportunistic and hospitable America, the dreamers of the American Dream. As more immigrants entered the States, the more the Dream was altered and the more these new citizens altered the Dream, the more immigrants they drew. The consistent immigration brought by both the American Dream and its citizens is a crucial part of American identity.

American citizens have transformed much more than the definition American Dream, they have transformed their country. Our country is a change catalyst that brings social change to the forefront of the world; we have repeatedly been a leader in sparking global changes as well as supporting global changes, starting with the American Revolution. Even at the time of the birth of America the country was already setting a global example, breaking from its mother

country in a revolution. The American Revolution not only showed America's strength but catalyzed other revolutions and rebellions, including those in France, Haiti, Ireland and Latin America (Motadel). The American Revolution is the epitome of American change brought about by the citizens; it was the start of a huge growth of a single country. The public was unhappy with its colonization and they had the optimism and perseverance to solve their unhappiness, thus defining an American attitude: you can do anything you set your mind to. It is not as if one person single handedly transformed America into its own country, it took the population as a whole to bond together in various ways and rise against their mother country. There were workers, fighters, supporters, makers, leaders, and decision-makers who united together because they were of the same country and same emotion. This first diverse group emanated patriotism and provided America with something to live up to.

America has also taken great strides in social movements, the type of alterations in thought that expand the American Dream and enhances the diversity of the public. It allows the country to develop into a more modern world and to be changed directly by the public's desires. Social movements' successes are hard to measure because the tangible evidence for them lies in each American individual's opinion: an accurate poll encompassing every American opinion is very near impossible. The only way to judge a social movement is by what legal measures, judicial opinion or legislative law, have been taken to include new social norms or ways of life in support of the movement. Most recently, homosexual acceptance has been a popular social movement debated by American citizens. There are an increasingly large amount of people who support homosexual couples and several states who have legally recognized homosexual marriage (*States*). These social and legal changes were only brought about by the attention and vehemence of gay rights activists. The movement is traced back as early as 1924, with many

obstacles, failures, and successes up until present day where this year the President openly supports gay marriage (*The American Gay Timeline*). Activists contact their legislators, coordinate fundraisers to support their cause, promote gay leaders, and in general spread knowledge of their cause to the American public. It takes one person who feels strongly about a certain cause to gather more people who agree with their opinion on this cause; however, the widespread acceptance of a social cause takes time, the changing of generations, and deals with each individual's morals. Although there is not acceptance of homosexuality by the entirety of the American public, it is important to note the progress made that would not be possible without passionate American citizens.

The future of America is quite like the present and the past: full of change. Change is in the hands of all unborn generations and generations who will soon enter the workforce. The American Dream will change and be changed by them, like citizens have done for years before today. The 2010 census showed larger diversity and cultural changes over 20 years than were anticipated (Nasser). Whether the country is aware of not, it will change inevitably; as generations change, social movements are accepted, mistakes are made, and America morphs for better or for worse. "By 2050, Americans will look back at the...controversies about diversity and wonder what the big deal was" (Nasser). Although changes are just starting to form in the present, some may take longer than others. The future is not an exponential curve of change, there are monitors put in place to ensure that change is not irrationally made. The legislative branch of our government is uniquely designed to require substantial votes to pass a bill into law and the judicial branch has nine justices for a reason. There are two main political parties who debate the many sides of an issue and who allow for easy recognition of the popular opinion.

These various systems permit change at a reasonable pace and at a time when that change is generally accepted.

More importantly, the future is unavoidably related to the present. The economic future of America is one of the most concerning factors considering its current state. Americans are unsure and worried about the poor economy and are dubious of the future of the economy. In this case, it is crucial to understand that America is about change: we will not always be in a negative place because the state of the nation will change. There will not always be a negative economy; somehow the country will improve from what it is now because Americans are an optimistic, hard-working, and passionate people. They have a consistent desire to strive for better; they will do what it takes. These common characteristics tell us that the future of the economy will hold some kind of positivity, but in the present it is nearly impossible to imagine how.

Trying to picture my grandfather as a young boy climbing a hill on his way to school is sometimes difficult. On the other hand, I am sure it was hard for him to imagine himself many years later reading a story about women CEOs on this thing called the Internet. The changes that have transformed and defined the country were completed by genuine, diligent Americans, like my grandfather, who are joined together because they are citizens of the same opportunistic place. Even in times of downfall and negativity in the United States, the people must remember how far their country has come and the attitude they are famous for. I am on the cusp of contributing to American culture and change in a way I haven't been able to before, which is an exciting but terrifying thought. My only hope is that my generation's contribution to America helps lift the country out of the negative state it has unfortunately entered. Luckily for the country, I have high hopes: I am an American.

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