The interpretation of the good life in the United States, commonly referred to as the American dream, is an evolving concept that has frequently been redefined through the course of American history. The main features of the American dream were often exclusionary to minority groups, but by the end of the twentieth century the notion had become significantly more comprehensive and accessible. Despite its changing nature, two constants have formed the core of the American dream: property and economic security.

For many of the original colonists, the promise of economic opportunity was the prime motivating factor in immigrating to the British territories in North America. This promise of a better life was represented by the potential to gain land. In an effort to encourage emigration the headright system of the mid-Atlantic colonies offered individuals as much as 50 acres (20 ha) of land for either coming to the colony or for paying the transport costs of a family member or an indentured servant (who would then be free to obtain land after a seven-year period of servitude). The headright system remained the most common manner to gain land in many of the colonies throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The push for new land led to armed conflict with the Native American tribes of the eastern seaboard. British efforts to curtail westward expansion were one of the contributing factors in the Revolutionary War.

The importance of property and the right of citizens to own and acquire property were incorporated in the Declaration of Independence and formed one of the hallmarks of American political culture. In an effort to secure the frontier, successive administrations in Washington encouraged resettlement in the West by opening territory to settlers, often granting land rights for minimal costs or even for free. Following the War of 1812 westward expansion greatly accelerated, and after the acquisition of California in the 1840s, the movement to fill in the interior of the nation was accelerated both by the economic promises of the California gold rush and by encouragement in the popular media, where prominent newspapermen such as Horace Greeley urged Easterners to “Go West” to seek their fortunes and the promise of a better life. Migration was encouraged by events such as the Oklahoma land rush. The government opened up some 3 million acres (1.2 million ha) of land to settlers in 160-acre (65-ha) plots for whites at the expense of the Native American tribes living in the territory.

Concurrent with the movement West there began to emerge a significant leisure class in the settled East. The dramatic growth in wages and increased urban services created improvements in the quality of life. The materialism of the period had a significant impact on literature and art. Social Darwinism and the traditional American emphasis on individualism reinforced class stereotypes. Quality of life was defined by wealth. While works such as Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner’s *The Gilded Age* (1873) criticized the unbridled greed of the time, popular magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and McClure’s expounded on the virtues of economic success. Meanwhile the publications of Horatio Alger...
(who wrote 130 works and sold millions of novels) made the “rags to riches” theme one of the central components of American culture.

For Americans at the onset of the twentieth century, the “good life” was marked by economic success. Nonetheless, the economic disparities created a backlash against the most extravagant displays of wealth. Within the emerging middle class many developed a nostalgia for the small-town lifestyle. The rise of monopolies, widespread poverty, and corruption in politics challenged the ideas of equality. Despite the reforms of the Progressive Era, the American dream remained beyond the reach of the millions of poor. Reformist writers, known as muckrakers, worked to expose the falsity of the American dream. For instance, Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle* (1906) emphasized the abuses in the meatpacking industry and helped spur reforms, including the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act. Meanwhile, segregation in the South and anti-immigrant sentiment in the Northeast and California further alienated groups within the United States.

The importance of economic success to perceptions of the good life was augmented by the economic boom of the 1920s. The rise of the consumer culture broadened the definition of the American dream to include not only property but various material items as well. Possession of automobiles, radios, and other consumer products became hallmarks of prosperity. The widespread use of advertising reinforced the public’s desire for these new products, while the availability of credit made ownership more practical and easier to accomplish with limited household budgets. Chain stores such as J. C. Penney and Woolworth’s offered consumers the same products on a national basis. As Americans bought the same merchandise, saw the same advertisements, and listened to the same radio programs or saw the same movies, regional differences began to fade and there arose conformity in fashion and lifestyle. This growing uniformity was brilliantly criticized by Sinclair Lewis in his 1922 novel, *Babbitt*. Lewis presented a satirical look at the fictional George Babbitt, who personified the materialism, closed-mindedness, and devotion to passing fads that marked the era.

The Great Depression and the war years of the early 1940s ended, or at the very least delayed, the aspirations of millions of Americans for any degree of prosperity. However, the end of World War II ushered in both the dramatic rise of consumerism and the subsequent emergence of the middle class as the dominant force in American culture. Hence the preferences and values of that group came to be absorbed into the mainstream as the modern “American dream.” The latter comprised a number of key objects of desire, including, besides a family and a career, a house in the suburbs and various material possessions, such as an automobile, a television, and an array of electric appliances.

Many of the trends begun in the 1920s reasserted themselves in the 1950s. In the United States, the gross national product (GNP) and real wages doubled from 1945 to 1960. There was a dramatic revival of consumerism as a wave of new products, including televisions and other electric appliances and automobiles, fueled the economy. Real gains in consumer purchasing power, easy credit, and price declines resulting from improved manufacturing made such products easily affordable. Mass production and the proliferation of chain outlets continued the growing conformity of American society. Stores such as the fast-food retailer McDonald's and the hotel chain Holiday Inn had spectacular success in meeting the needs of certain markets, while suburban malls created shopping megasites for consumers. Middle- and upper-class Americans traveled extensively and began to frequent such entertainment sites as Disneyland.

The second main component of the American dream (property) also reemerged in the late 1940s. New
means of construction led to a rapid expansion in the housing industry. By the 1950s approximately two million new homes were being built each year for the forty million Americans who fled the urban areas for the new suburbs. The expansion of the federal highway system made it possible for some ninety percent of workers to drive to their places of employment. Yet the growth of the suburbs further segregated society as the white middle class left urban centers. The loss of this purchasing power and tax base led to a lessening of services and commerce. The overall urban decline in the United States of the late 1960s and 1970s continued to accentuate the difference between the prosperous groups and the growing urban poor.

The main features of the American dream were vividly presented to the American people through the medium of television. Programs such as The Donna Reed Show and Father Knows Best presented images of American life that emphasized home ownership and the importance of material possessions. Advertising reinforced these impressions and promoted new products as well as the conspicuous consumption fueled by the notion of “keeping up with the Joneses.” This notion spurred consumers to be the first to own new products or new versions of goods.

Yet television also documented the civil rights movement and the overall struggle by minority groups to gain access to the good life. Televised, for example, was the violence encountered by people such as the Freedom Riders in their effort to overturn segregation and prompt social acceptance of the Supreme Court decisions of the 1950s and the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. This would be followed by the emergence of the counterculture in the 1960s. Movements within the counterculture rejected the materialism and conformity of the American dream and instead adopted alternative lifestyles. The traditional notion of family composed of a husband, wife, and two to three children also began to break down with the rise in divorce rates. Communal property and a refusal to participate in the mainstream workforce marked the hippie culture that originated in San Francisco. The economic downturn of the 1970s, led by the loss of industrial jobs, put the American dream further out of the reach of many Americans.

Despite the problems, however, the main ingredients at the core of the American dream remained consistent. Home ownership and material possession continued to be prized. In the 1980s there emerged a renewed emphasis on the accumulation of wealth and material items. Ownership of name-brand clothing or status-symbol cars continued to be seen as a mark of success. For many, the strong economy at the turn of the twenty-first century brought elements of the prized life within reach.

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Publicity photo of the Cleaver family from Leave it to Beaver. 1957. New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.


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