Along with millions of jobs and 401(k)s, the concept of a shared national ideal is said to be dying. But is the American Dream really endangered, or has it simply been misplaced? Exploring the way our aspirations have changed—the rugged individualism of the Wild West, the social compact of F.D.R., the sitcom fantasy of 50s suburbia—the author shows how the American Dream came to mean fame and fortune, instead of the promise that shaped a nation.

by David Kamp
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The year was 1930, a down one like this one. But for Moss Hart, it was the time for his particularly American moment of triumph. He had grown up poor in the outer boroughs of New York City—“the grim smell of actual want always at the end of my nose,” he said—and he’d vowed that if he ever made it big he would never again ride the rattling trains of the city’s dingy subway system. Now he was 25, and his first play, Once in a Lifetime, had just opened to raves on Broadway. And so, with three newspapers under his arm and a wee-hours celebration of a successful opening night behind him, he hailed a cab and took a long, leisurely sunrise ride back to the apartment in Brooklyn where he still lived with his parents and brother.

Crossing the Brooklyn Bridge into one of the several drab tenement neighborhoods that preceded his own, Hart later recalled, “I stared through the taxi window at a pinch-faced 10-year-old hurrying down the steps on some morning errand before school, and I thought of myself hurrying down the street on so many gray mornings out of a doorway and a house much the same as this one…. It was possible in this wonderful city for that nameless little boy—for any of its millions—to have a decent chance to scale the walls and achieve what they wished. Wealth, rank, or an imposing name counted for nothing. The only credential the city asked was the boldness to dream.”

As the boy ducked into a tailor shop, Hart recognized that this narrative was not exclusive to his “wonderful city”—it was one that could happen anywhere in, and only in, America. “A surge of shamefaced patriotism overwhelmed me,” Hart wrote in his memoir, Act One. “I might have been watching a victory parade on a flag-draped Fifth Avenue instead of the mean streets of a city slum. A feeling of patriotism, however, is not always limited to the feverish emotions called forth by war. It can sometimes feel as profoundly and perhaps more truly at a moment such as this.”

Hart, like so many before and after him, was overcome by the power of the American Dream. As a people, we Americans are unique in having such a thing, a more or less Official National Dream. (There is no correspondingly stirring Canadian Dream or Slovakian Dream.) It is part of our charter—as articulated in the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, in the famous bit about “certain
unalienable Rights” that include “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”—and it is what makes our country and our way of life attractive and magnetic to people in other lands.

5. But now fast-forward to the year 2009, the final Friday of January. The new president is surveying the dire economy he has been charged with righting—600,000 jobs lost in January alone, a gross domestic product that shrank 3.8 percent in the final quarter of 2008, the worst contraction in almost 30 years. Assessing these numbers, Barack Obama, a man who normally exudes hopefulness for a living, pronounces them a “continuing disaster for America’s working families,” a disaster that amounts to no less, he says, than “the American Dream in reverse.”

6. In reverse. Imagine this in terms of Hart’s life: out of the taxicab, back on the subway, back to the tenements, back to cramped cohabitation with Mom and Dad, back to gray mornings and the grim smell of actual want.

7. You probably don’t even have to imagine, for chances are that of late you have experienced some degree of reversal yourself, or at the very least have had friends or loved ones get laid off, lose their homes, or just find themselves forced to give up certain perks and amenities (restaurant meals, cable TV, salon haircuts) that were taken for granted as recently as a year ago.

8. These are tough times for the American Dream. As the safe routines of our lives have come undone, so has our characteristic optimism—not only our belief that the future is full of limitless possibility, but our faith that things will eventually return to normal, whatever “normal” was before the recession hit. There is even worry that the dream may be over—that we currently living Americans are the unfortunate ones who shall bear witness to that deflating moment in history when the promise of this country began to wither. This is the “sapping of confidence” that President Obama alluded to in his inaugural address, the “nagging fear that America’s decline is inevitable, and that the next generation must lower its sights.”

9. But let’s face it: If Moss Hart, like so many others, was able to rally from the depths of the Great Depression, then surely the viability of the American Dream isn’t in question. What needs to change is our expectation of what the dream promises—and our understanding of what that vague and promiscuously used term, “the American Dream,” is really supposed to mean.

10. In recent years, the term has often been interpreted to mean “making it big” or “striking it rich.” (As the cult of Brian De Palma’s Scarface has grown, so, disturbingly, has the number of people with a literal, celebratory read on its tagline: “He loved the American Dream. With a vengeance.”) Even when the phrase isn’t being used to describe the accumulation of great wealth, it’s frequently deployed to denote extreme success of some kind or other. Last year, I heard commentators say that Barack Obama achieved the American Dream by getting elected president, and that Philadelphia Phillies
manager Charlie Manuel achieved the American Dream by leading his team to its first World Series title since 1980.

11. Yet there was never any promise or intimation of extreme success in the book that popularized the term, The Epic of America, by James Truslow Adams, published by Little, Brown and Company in 1931. (Yes, “the American Dream” is a surprisingly recent coinage; you’d think that these words would appear in the writings of Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin, but they don’t.) For a book that has made such a lasting contribution to our vocabulary, The Epic of America is an offbeat piece of work—a sweeping, essayistic, highly subjective survey of this country’s development from Columbus’s landfall onward, written by a respected but solemn historian whose prim prose style was mocked as “spinach” by the waggish theater critic Alexander Woolcott.

12. But it’s a smart, thoughtful treatise. Adams’s goal wasn’t so much to put together a proper history of the U.S. as to determine, by tracing his country’s path to prominence, what makes this land so unlike other nations, so uniquely American. (That he undertook such an enterprise when he did, in the same grim climate in which Hart wrote Once in a Lifetime, reinforces how indomitably strong Americans’ faith in their country remained during the Depression.) What Adams came up with was a construct he called “that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank.”

13. From the get-go, Adams emphasized the egalitarian nature of this dream. It started to take shape, he said, with the Puritans who fled religious persecution in England and settled New England in the 17th century. “[Their] migration was not like so many earlier ones in history, led by warrior lords with followers dependent on them,” he wrote, “but was one in which the common man as well as the leader was hoping for greater freedom and happiness for himself and his children.”

14. The Declaration of Independence took this concept even further, for it compelled the well-to-do upper classes to put the common man on an equal footing with them where human rights and self-governance were concerned—a nose-holding concession that Adams captured with exquisite comic passiveness in the sentence, “It had been found necessary to base the [Declaration’s] argument at last squarely on the rights of man.” Whereas the colonist upper classes were asserting their independence from the British Empire, “the lower classes were thinking not only of that,” Adams wrote, “but of their relations to their colonial legislatures and governing class.”

15. America was truly a new world, a place where one could live one’s life and pursue one’s goals unburdened by older societies’ prescribed ideas of class, caste, and social hierarchy. Adams was unreserved in his wonderment over this fact. Breaking from his formal tone, he shifted into first-person mode in The Epic of America’s epilogue, noting a French guest’s remark that his most striking impression of the United States was “the way that everyone of every sort looks you right in the eye, without a thought of inequality.” Adams also told a story of “a foreigner” he used to employ as an
assistant, and how he and this foreigner fell into a habit of chitchatting for a bit after their day’s work was done. “Such a relationship was the great difference between America and his homeland,” Adams wrote. “There, he said, ‘I would do my work and might get a pleasant word, but I could never sit and talk like this. There is a difference there between social grades which cannot be got over. I would not talk to you there as man to man, but as my employer.’”

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16. It’s also worth noting that Adams did not deny that there is a material component to the American Dream. The Epic of America offers several variations on Adams’s definition of the dream (e.g., “the American dream that life should be made richer and fuller for everyone and opportunity remain open to all”), but the word “richer” appears in all of them, and he wasn’t just talking about richness of experience. Yet Adams was careful not to overstate what the dream promises. In one of his final iterations of the “American Dream” trope, he described it as “that 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.”

17. That last part—“according to his ability or achievement”—is the tempering phrase, a shrewd bit of expectations management. A “better and richer life” is promised, but for most people this won’t be a rich person’s life. “Opportunity for each” is promised, but within the bounds of each person’s ability; the reality is, some people will realize the American Dream more stupendously and significantly than others. (For example, while President Obama is correct in saying, “Only in America is my story possible,” this does not make it true that anyone in America can be the next Obama.) Nevertheless, the American Dream is within reach for all those who aspire to it and are willing to put in the hours; Adams was articulating it as an attainable outcome, not as a pipe dream.

18. As the phrase “the American Dream” insinuated its way into the lexicon, its meaning continuously morphed and shifted, reflecting the hopes and wants of the day. Adams, in The Epic of America, noted that one such major shift had already occurred in the republic’s history, before he’d given the dream its name. In 1890, the U.S. Census Bureau declared that there was no longer such a thing as the American frontier. This was not an official pronouncement but an observation in the bureau’s report that “the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line.”

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19. The American Dream was maturing into a shared dream, a societal compact that reached its apotheosis when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was sworn into office in 1933 and began implementing the
New Deal. A “better and richer and fuller” life was no longer just what America promised its hardworking citizens individually; it was an ideal toward which these citizens were duty-bound to strive together. The Social Security Act of 1935 put this theory into practice. It mandated that workers and their employers contribute, via payroll taxes, to federally administered trust funds that paid out benefits to retirees—thereby introducing the idea of a “safe old age” with built-in protection from penury.

20. This was, arguably, the first time that a specific material component was ascribed to the American Dream, in the form of a guarantee that you could retire at the age of 65 and rest assured that your fellow citizens had your back. On January 31, 1940, a hardy Vermonter named Ida May Fuller, a former legal secretary, became the very first retiree to receive a monthly Social Security benefit check, which totaled $22.54. As if to prove both the best hopes of Social Security’s proponents and the worst fears of its detractors, Fuller enjoyed a long retirement, collecting benefits all the way to her death in 1975, when she was 100 years old.

Still, the American Dream, in F.D.R.’s day, remained largely a set of deeply held ideals rather than a checklist of goals or entitlements.

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21. But this latest recalibration saw the American Dream get decoupled from any concept of the common good (the movement to privatize Social Security began to take on momentum) and, more portentously, from the concepts of working hard and managing one’s expectations. You only had to walk as far as your mailbox to discover that you’d been “pre-approved” for six new credit cards, and that the credit limits on your existing cards had been raised without your even asking. Never before had money been freer, which is to say, never before had taking on debt become so guiltless and seemingly consequence-free—at both the personal and institutional levels. President Reagan added $1 trillion to the national debt, and in 1986, the United States, formerly the world’s biggest creditor nation, became the world’s biggest debtor nation. Perhaps debt was the new frontier.

22. A curious phenomenon took hold in the 1990s and 2000s. Even as the easy credit continued, and even as a sustained bull market cheered investors and papered over the coming mortgage and credit crises that we now face, Americans were losing faith in the American Dream—or whatever it was they believed the American Dream to be. A CNN poll taken in 2006 found that more than half of those surveyed, 54 percent, considered the American Dream unachievable—and CNN noted that the numbers were nearly the same in a 2003 poll it had conducted. Before that, in 1995, a Business Week/Harris poll found that two-thirds of those surveyed believed the American Dream had become harder to achieve in the past 10 years, and three-fourths believed that achieving the dream would be harder still in the upcoming 10 years.
23. To the writer Gregg Easterbrook, who at the beginning of this decade was a visiting fellow in economics at the Brookings Institution, this was all rather puzzling, because, by the definition of any prior American generation, the American Dream had been more fully realized by more people than ever before. While acknowledging that an obscene amount of America’s wealth was concentrated in the hands of a small group of ultra-rich, Easterbrook noted that “the bulk of the gains in living standards—the gains that really matter—have occurred below the plateau of wealth.”

24. By nearly every measurable indicator, Easterbrook pointed out in 2003, life for the average American had gotten better than it used to be. Per capita income, adjusted for inflation, had more than doubled since 1960. Almost 70 percent of Americans owned the places they lived in, versus under 20 percent a century earlier. Furthermore, U.S. citizens averaged 12.3 years of education, tops in the world and a length of time in school once reserved solely for the upper class.

24. Yet when Easterbrook published these figures in a book, the book was called The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse. He was paying attention not only to the polls in which people complained that the American Dream was out of reach, but to academic studies by political scientists and mental-health experts that detected a marked uptick since the midcentury in the number of Americans who considered themselves unhappy.

25. The American Dream was now almost by definition unattainable, a moving target that eluded people’s grasp; nothing was ever enough. It compelled Americans to set unmeetable goals for themselves and then consider themselves failures when these goals, inevitably, went unmet. In examining why people were thinking this way, Easterbrook raised an important point. “For at least a century,” he wrote, “Western life has been dominated by a revolution of rising expectations: Each generation expected more than its antecedent. Now most Americans and Europeans already have what they need, in addition to considerable piles of stuff they don’t need.”

26. This might explain the existential ennui of the well-off, attractive, solipsistic kids on Laguna Beach (2004–6) and The Hills (2006–9), the MTV reality soaps that represent the curdling of the whole Southern California wish-fulfillment genre on television. Here were affluent beach-community teens enriching themselves further not even by acting or working in any real sense, but by allowing themselves to be filmed as they sat by campfires mauldering on about, like, how much their lives suck.

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27. In hewing to the misbegotten notion that our standard of living must trend inexorably upward, we entered in the late 90s and early 00s into what might be called the Juiceball Era of the American Dream—a time of steroidally outsize purchasing and artificially inflated numbers. As Easterbrook saw it,
it was no longer enough for people to keep up with the Joneses; no, now they had to “call and raise the Joneses.”

28. “Bloated houses,” he wrote, “arise from a desire to call-and-raise-the-Joneses—surely not from a belief that a seven-thousand-square-foot house that comes right up against the property setback line would be an ideal place in which to dwell.” More ominously and to the point: “To call-and-raise-the-Joneses, Americans increasingly take on debt.”

29. This personal debt, coupled with mounting institutional debt, is what has got us in the hole we’re in now. While it remains a laudable proposition for a young couple to secure a low-interest loan for the purchase of their first home, the more recent practice of running up huge credit-card bills to pay for, well, whatever, has come back to haunt us. …

... 30. The middle class is a good place to be, and, optimally, where most Americans will spend their lives if they work hard and don’t over-extend themselves financially. On American Idol, Simon Cowell has done a great many youngsters a great service by telling them that they’re not going to Hollywood and that they should find some other line of work. The American Dream is not fundamentally about stardom or extreme success; in recalibrating our expectations of it, we need to appreciate that it is not an all-or-nothing deal—that it is not, as in hip-hop narratives and in Donald Trump’s brain, a stark choice between the penthouse and the streets.

31. And what about the outmoded proposition that each successive generation in the United States must live better than the one that preceded it? While this idea is still crucial to families struggling in poverty and to immigrants who’ve arrived here in search of a better life than that they left behind, it’s no longer applicable to an American middle class that lives more comfortably than any version that came before it. (Was this not one of the cautionary messages of the most thoughtful movie of 2008, wall-e?) I’m no champion of downward mobility, but the time has come to consider the idea of simple continuity: the perpetuation of a contented, sustainable middle-class way of life, where the standard of living remains happily constant from one generation to the next.

32. This is not a matter of any generation’s having to “lower its sights,” to use President Obama’s words, nor is it a denial that some children of lower- and middle-class parents will, through talent and/or good fortune, strike it rich and bound precipitously into the upper class. Nor is it a moony, nostalgic wish for a return to the scrappy 30s or the suburban 50s, because any sentient person recognizes that there’s plenty about the good old days that wasn’t so good: the original Social Security program pointedly excluded farmworkers and domestics (i.e., poor rural laborers and minority women), and the original Levittown didn’t allow black people in.
33. But those eras do offer lessons in scale and self-control. The American Dream should require hard work, but it should not require 80-hour workweeks and parents who never see their kids from across the dinner table. The American Dream should entail a first-rate education for every child, but not an education that leaves no extra time for the actual enjoyment of childhood. The American Dream should accommodate the goal of home ownership, but without imposing a lifelong burden of unmeetable debt. Above all, the American Dream should be embraced as the unique sense of possibility that this country gives its citizens—the decent chance, as Moss Hart would say, to scale the walls and achieve what you wish.