**The Death of the American Dream**

By Marsha Coleman-Adebayo

When I was growing up there was a sense that if you were born American, then you were in the land of opportunity. The American Dream was the narcotic we all inhaled and fed to our children.

Collins Dictionary defines it as, "the notion that the American social, economic, and political system makes success possible for every individual." What wild, hopeful dreamers we were.

My family stepped from slavery, my mother believed that with education there would be no obstacle her girl could not overcome, I married someone who had traveled here to obtain an education that matched his talent, an education he could not get in his home country. He stayed, the American dream became his.

David Camp, in a brilliant Vanity Fair article in 2009, *Rethinking the American Dream,* expressed the fear that the American dream has morphed from a desire to live well, to consumerist greed. " It was freedom *from* want, not freedom *to* want--a world away from the idea that the patriotic thing to do in tough times is go shopping."

Now it seems every public holiday whether Memorial Day or Thanksgiving has a shopping extravaganza attached to it in the form of sales, that's why, the national psyche appears to believe we get to stay at home on these days of remembrance to go shopping, to buy more of that which we don't really need.

Jason Deparle in the International Herald Tribune notes however, that the American dream is a myth, "Americans enjoy less economic mobility than their peers in Canada and much of Western Europe." He quotes a study by Markus Jantti, a Swedish economist who "found that 42 percent of American men raised in the bottom fifth of incomes stay there as adults"(Denmark 25 percent, Britain 30 percent). Just eight percent of Americans at the bottom rose to the top fifth, which compares with 12 percent of the British and 14 percent of the Danes.

Other factors that led to greater difficulty to move out of poverty here included more children raised by single mothers, "uniquely high incarceration rates," "pay in America tilts heavily toward those who have" education and "access to better schools." Deparle quotes research that notes: "The United States is less unionized than many of its peers, which may lead to lower wages among the least skilled."

But there are other ways that we can see the dream has become corrupted:

\*    In 2010, the Institute for Policy Studies in a report *The Massive CEO Rewards for Tax Dodging* noted "The gap between chief executive compensation and average U.S. worker pay rose from a ratio of 263-to-1 in 2009 to 325-to-1 in 2010. "

\*   The United States is the third most productive economy in the world (behind Taiwan and Sweden) but at a significant cost; from 1979 to 2000, married couples with children increased their working hours on average by around 16 percent or almost 500 hours per year, according to *Running Faster to Stay in Place: The growth of family work hours and incomes,* from the America Foundation, [click here](http://newAmerica.net/publications/policy/running_faster_to_stay_in_place.) Those hours have increased since the 2008 economic crisis and many employees are resorting to medications to help them cope, which in turn is seeing unprecedented prescription drug addiction.

\*   Professor Stephen Cohen, a lecturer in tax law at Georgetown University notes that this translates to fewer hours to care for children, clean the house and relax.   He says that, " inflation adjustments that make the data from different years comparable do not seem to adequately reflect increases in the cost of housing, which is the largest single expenditure for most households. According to a study by Robert H. Frank, the median earner, who had to work 41.5 hours monthly to pay for a home in 1970, had to work 67.5 hours monthly to pay for an equivalent home in 2000."

\*   Cohen points to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook note that the Gini co-efficient, the measure of inequality in a society is higher in the United States, "thus evidencing more income inequality -- than for any other industrialized country" The CIA's Gini coefficient for the United States is 0.450 (2007), compared, for example, with 0.270 for Germany (2006), 0.327 for France (2008), 0.247 for Hungary (2009), 0.320 for Italy (2006), 0.376 for Japan (2008), and 0.340 for the United Kingdom (2005)."

\*   And Professor Juliet Schor, a senior lecturer in economics at Harvard has observed: "Americans are literally working themselves to death--as jobs contribute to heart disease, hypertension, gastric problems, depression, exhaustion, and a variety of other ailments. Surprisingly, the high-powered jobs are not the most dangerous. The most stressful workplaces are the "electronic sweatshops" and assembly lines where a demanding pace is coupled with virtually no individual discretion" According to sleep researchers, studies point to a "sleep deficit" among Americans " the number of people showing up at sleep disorder clinics with serious problems has skyrocketed""

Camp observes that, " In his 1958 book *The Affluent Society,* a best-seller, [John Kenneth] Galbraith posited that America had reached an almost unsurpassable and unsustainable degree of mass affluence because the average family owned a home, one car, and one TV. In pursuing these goals, Galbraith said, Americans had lost a sense of their priorities, focusing on consumerism at the expense of public-sector needs like parks, schools, and infrastructure maintenance. At the same time, they had lost their parents' Depression-era sense of thrift, blithely taking out personal loans or enrolling in installment plans to buy their cars and refrigerators."

  And by 1986 President Reagan added $1 trillion to the national debt, and the United States, formerly the world's biggest creditor nation, became the world's biggest debtor nation. In succumbing to greed we've lost our way, the dream has gone, as we grasp after more our capacity to attain it flees.