

Gilligan: Labor Day 2017: The American Dream

By John F. Gilligan

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These should be good times.

The recovery from the Great Recession is now entering its ninth year. Most economists project continuation. In two years it will become the longest economic recovery in American history. Nonfarm private employment has risen for a record 87 straight months. And the unemployment rate of 4.3 percent is the lowest in 16 years.

The Atlanta Federal Reserve reports that the typical working American's annual wage increase has risen from 2 percent to 3 percent this year, higher in major cities. And for the first time, wage increases for workers in the bottom 10th of the wage scale have, by percentage increase, exceeded those in the top 10th.

There's good news for pension plan holders. The Dow Jones Industrial Average is fluctuating around 22,000. On Nov. 20, 2008, it was 7552.29.

These are reasons enough to celebrate Labor Day 2017. Yet there's a pervasive angst about job and financial security among most Americans.

A recent Pew Charitable Trusts survey reveals that Americans are "walking on a financial tightrope." Sixty-two percent don't believe that their children will be economically better off than they. Likewise, the Federal Reserve indicates that 47 percent of American adults would have trouble paying for a \$400 emergency.

Hence the reoccurring question: Is the American Dream dead? Of course, it's dead for those who believe it's dead. And a dream without action is merely a daydream.

By way of contrast, an international poll states that 80 percent of Chinese believe in the China Dream. "China will supplant America to be the world's No. 1 strong country," says Li Xiaopeng, China's leading blogger and a Harvard graduate. He claims that what the Chinese have learned from the West is exactly what they don't want.

With the impressive rise of China on the world stage, it's easy to become alarmed. But this comparison is more like one between a rock and a tree. Which one do you want to live under? There's a price for everything.

The emerging global face-off is between autocratic and liberal governments. Top-down political systems demand conformity and subservience to the state. Everything hinges on a strong leader.

The American Dream is ensconced in a free-wheeling, bottom-up political system dependent upon voluntary compliance, personal responsibility and initiative. The greatness of America is its people. And the state secures the rights of the people.

The most powerful determining force of where a society goes is driven by either optimism or pessimism. The above surveys, although imperfect, suggest a less hopeful mood in America. The result is perverse: People stop trying to be successful, which guarantees failure.

There are 6.2 million unfilled jobs. Employers can't find people with the knowledge, skills and motivation to fill them. Meanwhile, 5.7 million men have adopted a lifestyle of not working. They're not included in unemployment statistics. Nicholas Eberstadt's "Men Without Work" identifies this army of able-bodied men between the ages of 25 to 55 as "America's invisible crisis." Its size has been growing nonstop since 1964.

What do they do? Eberstadt's in-depth research: approximately 10 minutes of work a day, with the remaining time devoted to video games, internet activities, Tinder, TV, drugs and alcohol. But they know how to exploit the welfare system.

Part of keeping the American Dream alive is by inspiring hope and opportunity in American children. They can have a better life and build a better America. But it takes self-discipline, diligent work, determination to pursue a goal and persistence to be successful.

This is what the psychologist Angela Duckworth calls grit. Her research during the last 10 years demonstrates that grit more than socioeconomic status, IQ, physical conditions and even college degrees is the determinate factor of success.

Our nation's history has been filled with dire and evil times. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt and the American people fought off despairing moods when the nation was on the verge of dissolution.

Resilience is part of our American heritage. Americans have always risen to make a better nation and never have accepted a victim status. A great country finds ways to overcome obstacles and is never overwhelmed by them. That's grit. "We shall overcome" is what will keep the American Dream alive.

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