

INTRO: One nation, under god, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. America, home of the ultimate dream: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But how do we define this dream What has happened to it? And what is it's future? Get ready to explore these questions in the first installment of CCBC Dundalk's American Dream Podcast with special guest, professor Robertson.

MASON: My name is Mason Turner, and today I have Professor Robertson, a Sociology and American Pluralism Professor here at CCBC joining us to speak about the American Dream and how it is defined versus the reality it is today. To start off professor, tell us a little about yourself. You were born in the States right?

PROF. ROBERTSON: Yes I was. I was born in a small mining town in western Maryland known as Frostburg. To use the colloquial at the time, we were a bunch of hillbillies.

MASON: Do you think that it drastically formed your perception of the American Dream?

PROF. ROBERTSON: Oh absolutely! When you see the economic times and the economic opportunities of the folks in that area being very, very limited, then you move to a larger city where you see much more of it, yeah, there is very much was shaped by my Hill people.

MASON: Growing up did you have a clear picture of what the American dream was supposed to be?

PROF. ROBERTSON: I was born in frostburg, but i grew up in Dundalk. All of my schooling was in Dundalk, from Norwood to Holabird then to Dundalk High. And Norwood at the time was a blue-collar, steel worker, General Motors town and so our view of that American dream was you go to the Point, you work hard, you get the house on Walnut Avenue, then you build a garage and you build an upstairs and you build a basement and you have this wonderful life which actually for many guys who worked at the point at that time was a reality. Until Bethlehem Steel began to go down in terms of profits and power.

MASON: Did you think America had similar clarity and their view of the American Dream?

PROF. ROBERTSON: Well you got to realize, when I'm coming through the time we're talkin say between '65 and '75 and that time period in American history, this idea of an American Dream was kind of clouded by conflict in Southeast Asia. The divisions we see in society today are in large part similar to many of the divisions we saw that time. So Clarity in the '60's, no I think things were clouded.

MASON: Did you have any influences in your early life which shaped the way you saw America in the past?

PROF. ROBERTSON: One of the things that helped to shape me was that Daddy wanted us to see, to explore to read. There were books in our house all the time, and I was constantly reading things civil war on World War II having influences of my grandparents who would live through the depression in the mining town. So those were the folks basically instilled in me that sense of you work hard, but you also maintain your integrity, and you also maintain your dignity. You don't follow something blindly because someone says it's the right thing to do. You go through, and you decide for yourself what's right for you and your family. Well I was more of the other line that the American dream wasn't so much to have the house and the picket fence and the 1969 white Dodge Polara. Mine was like, I would rather have the opportunity to read, and I want to explore, and I want to feel, and I want to get into things and and get to the marrow of what all I had for you.

MASON: Has your view of the American dream changed over time?

PROF. ROBERTSON: Mine probably not. I have an issue with the American dream being couched in kind of an economic term. See it throughout American history, I mean the American dream just the term American dream is American scripture just like City on the Hill from the Puritans in colonial days and then we etch it into stone with life Liberty and the pursuit of happiness. You know. I get life. I understand liberty but what the heck is pursuit of happiness. Well it's whatever we want it to be. Then we have a civil war going on. Well maybe all men are created equal. Then we get into the industrialization. Work hard. Protestant work ethic and then we have the Great Depression

going and well maybe that didn't work either. Well what's next American dream and then we have that American dream coming out, coming out of World War II. Again it's monetary. It's economic. It's this, this idea if you work hard you get these monetary things. I've always been one that looked at an American dream in terms of having the opportunity to kind of explore the things that would make you the happiest. Because if you're the happiest, then society will be happier. When I was growing up in the '60s and '70s it was always like "Oh I'm just glad I'm not in the Soviet Union because they have to work in factories and they're told what to do in school and and those factory workers, they get up and go everyday. And then they get two weeks vacation at the seaside resort." I can think well, "Oh that would be terrible," and then I realized my daddy got up everyday, drove this Ford Econoline to Bethlehem Steel, had 2 weeks vacation. The week of which we spend the night Ocean City for 40-some years, and he only missed a handful of days, and he believed in his heart of hearts that if you took care of Bethlehem Steel, Bethlehem Steel would take care of him. And my daddy has always been neurotic about health. He has decided he's going to live forever and so far he's doing pretty good with it. So it was kind of cruel joke when we were, my wife and I were driving back from visiting her folks in Florida, and we get a phone call saying your dad has had a heart attack. I'm thinking how could my father have a heart attack. Well it's hereditary. While I mean it's one of those things I've had a heart attack. I mean it's all in how we were made up, but the terrible thing is is that while he's laying in a hospital bed recuperating, He gets a letter from the United Steelworkers saying that, "As of the end of the month all pension, health care benefits will be taken away because of the bankruptcy of Bethlehem Steel in the aggregation of the contract with the United Steelworkers." Now there's something un-American about those folks, who believed in professed that American dream and yet we're not given the opportunity to really live it after their working days were done. That's as if we've got to pawn let's use them. They'll work hard. Yea, well the profits not there now so let's just kind of push them away. Now fortunately for my family, my mom went back to school and have a job that has health care benefits, and they've been able to have a good life for themselves. At the same time you could talk to thousands of folks just within a stone's throw at this campus that will have different stories about how what happened to Bethlehem Steel and the folks at General Motors and the folks at Bendix. How they lost everything simply once that profit margin ended. And what's that say about an American Dream for those folks?

MASON: How has America and, subsequently, the Dream changed over the course of its history?

PROF. ROBERTSON: It all depends on where you want to stop and start. It's history that flows. It ebbs and flows. It shifts. It changes, but it turns around that you have a group that create a myth and those that follow it. And then those that say, "Huh why is it like that?"

MASON: How do you think this has affected its inhabitants?

PROF. ROBERTSON: It gives them the comfort and the problem of well I can work hard, and I can get all of this not realizing that quite possibly that hard work may go out the door once you said, "I want to retire." Now some folks need to have that. I mean it it's just how do we know what our elected representatives are actually doing in our name and and that you get some folks who say, "Well I'm going to back this guy and this political party because why I always have." Yeah, well that might not be the best thing for you now given your situation "Doesn't matter. They're good. The other ones suck eggs." Where we are now is we have much more of that division much more of a tribalism of "us" versus "them." We have to pick a side and then we have to maintain that side at all costs because well that's our side now. It's just like in football. If you live in Baltimore, you know, it's "Yea Ravens!" right, "Steelers suck." And Pittsburgh, you know, "Steelers! Ravens suck!" And it doesn't matter what anyone in purple does, you know, if you're wearing black and gold that purple guy "They suck." Folks are screaming for an American dream. Again the problem is is that there's not enough openings in this American Dream for folks as the accumulation of wealth becomes more and more in the hands of fewer and fewer. And it was the same thing to when industrialization started. You have, say, someone like Andrew Carnegie who ran steel mills up in Western Pennsylvania. These poor guys who work in the Carnegie steel mills, they're working six and a half days basically just to be at the poverty line in a job that was dangerous and yet you had that protestant work ethic of work really hard and someday you will be just like Andrew Carnegie because he came from nothing and became something. Well that's true, he had nothing and became something, but how many Andrew Carnegies were there? Well one. And how many people work for him? Who knows. We've always had those kinds of things and it's the folks like to hang on to that. And also, if you start using American dream, it starts making us seem like we're exceptional. We're special.

MASON: Do you think America's social, financial, and political climate has taken the Dream away from its citizens?

PROF. ROBERTSON: I think the opportunities are going to be much more limited, but I think there's a lot more people who do not have the opportunity. They were going to be grasping to maintain the dream the toughest things that all politicians of all stripes was they keep talking about we're going to make jobs, jobs, jobs and that word "jobs" making folks again, like Pursuit of Happiness. You know my concept of a good job could be different than the concept of those sitting around this table. We don't have the opportunities that we used to because we are now global society, and the more we go to, "We got to make sure all the stuff happens in America." We're going to go right down rabbit hole. We're going to have a hard time getting ourselves out of there. There was a great video called *Mardi Gras Made in China* where it shows folks and rubbery in New Orleans on Mardi Gras. And I love New Orleans. New Orleans to me is one of the greatest cities in the world, but they show all of these folks with all sorts of different beads and knick-knacks. And then they show where these beads and knick-knacks and everything are made in China. And which makes me then say what happens when those people want what we have. You know, instead of looking at it as well we've got to maintain the American dream. We need answer the question of "Should some people have less so other people can have more?" When do we go from this idea of "Well we got it. They ain't. Hahaha they're losers." To you know, well how about when China calls in the debt what happens when this country does this or this country does that. Well should some have less so others can have more instead of saying well we're special and we have this dream of we work hard and do it. Why can't we all work towards what it is it's going to be the best for all of us. And coal miners, they are talking about well we're going to bring coal jobs back we're going to bring coal jobs back I understand. I am the first Robertson not to have worked in coal mines ever-so-many years The coal miners workers union has to go to Congress and lobby to have their pension continued. I mean in the lobby to have health care benefits continued. So we want to have all these coal jobs, but then what are you going to do with the worker when that coal job isn't there anymore or we finally get the sense to have solar power or wind power. American dream is great to play with it's just what do you do with the players once they've been used up to promote and to pursue that American dream. You know, what do you do when they retire?

MASON: Is it possible to save the dream?

PROF. ROBERTSON: I guess it's all in if you want the dream. The dream is such a strange thing. It's like life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What is it? You know, now I guess if we could come up with an idea of it. Personally, I mean, Tommy Joe Robertson, I think you should take that whole concept of a dream and toss it out a little bit and just basically say "How can we all get along?" I would prefer to get along right now then to see which one of us can reach the mcmansion stage quickest. I get up every morning. I go to a barn. I muck stalls. I feed horses, and I come in and teach. I enjoy it. It's a passion for me. Will I ever make a lot of money? Haha thank goodness my wife does. You know, 'cuz I have four horses. But that's the deal. My dream, my dream is to raise more horses. I have beautiful little Philly right now and I'd like to see a few more beautiful little Phillies before my time here is done and that's not going to necessitate me to having the biggest house, the fanciest car. F-150 works fine.

MASON: Last question, so what do we do now?

PROF. ROBERTSON: One of those the gentleman who has in education who has influenced me the most is a gentleman by the name of Colman McCarthy. And, and, and Colman McCarthy has dedicated his life to teaching nonviolence. Okay? And Colman basically says, "Look this isn't going to happen overnight," you know "but we need to get folks to think in terms of how can we take that first step to do this? How can we take that first step to do that so that a cumulative effect what would help kind of change the society or the views?" Colman always finishes up with, "What we need to do," and I think this really goes to your point is "What we need to do," and is what comes from the most holy of words. He said, "There's one word that is the most holy of all the one word that has to be there," Of course the first time I heard him do this, I'm thinking when we have commitment, effort, you know, it's the educator in me that made me think I gotta have the answer. I gotta have the answer. And he said, "The most holy of words, "start" because no matter what you do you start." So is it too late. No just start to think of how well could things be different here, or start to think about what I might do there so what can we do or is it too late? No, no it's never too late to start. As to what path you'll wind down? I don't know. Robert Frost said, "The Road Less Traveled," kind of deal. I've always found that one to be much more

fun. So start working towards what you think is a better life and stop listening to someone tell you what it is you have to have.

OUTRO: Thank you all for listening to the American Dream podcast from CCBC Dundalk. Tune in next time as we continue to explore what has happened to the Dream the United States was founded upon. Thank you.