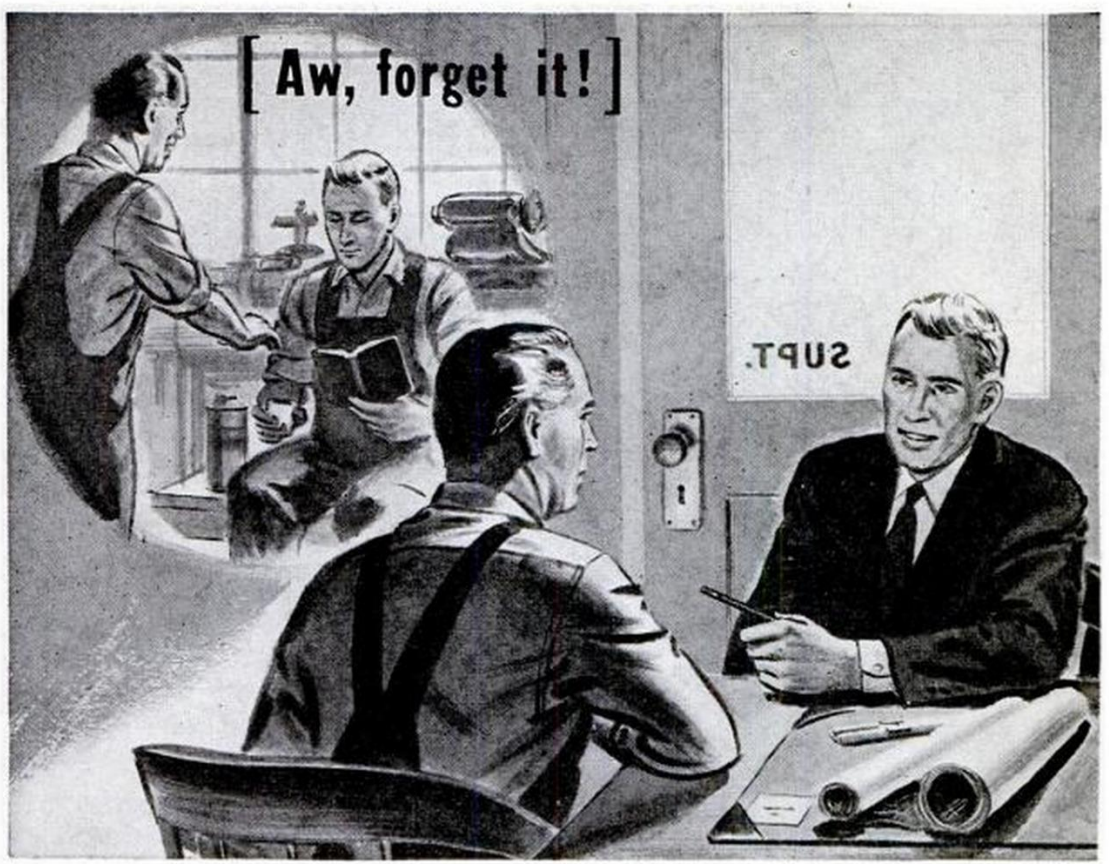
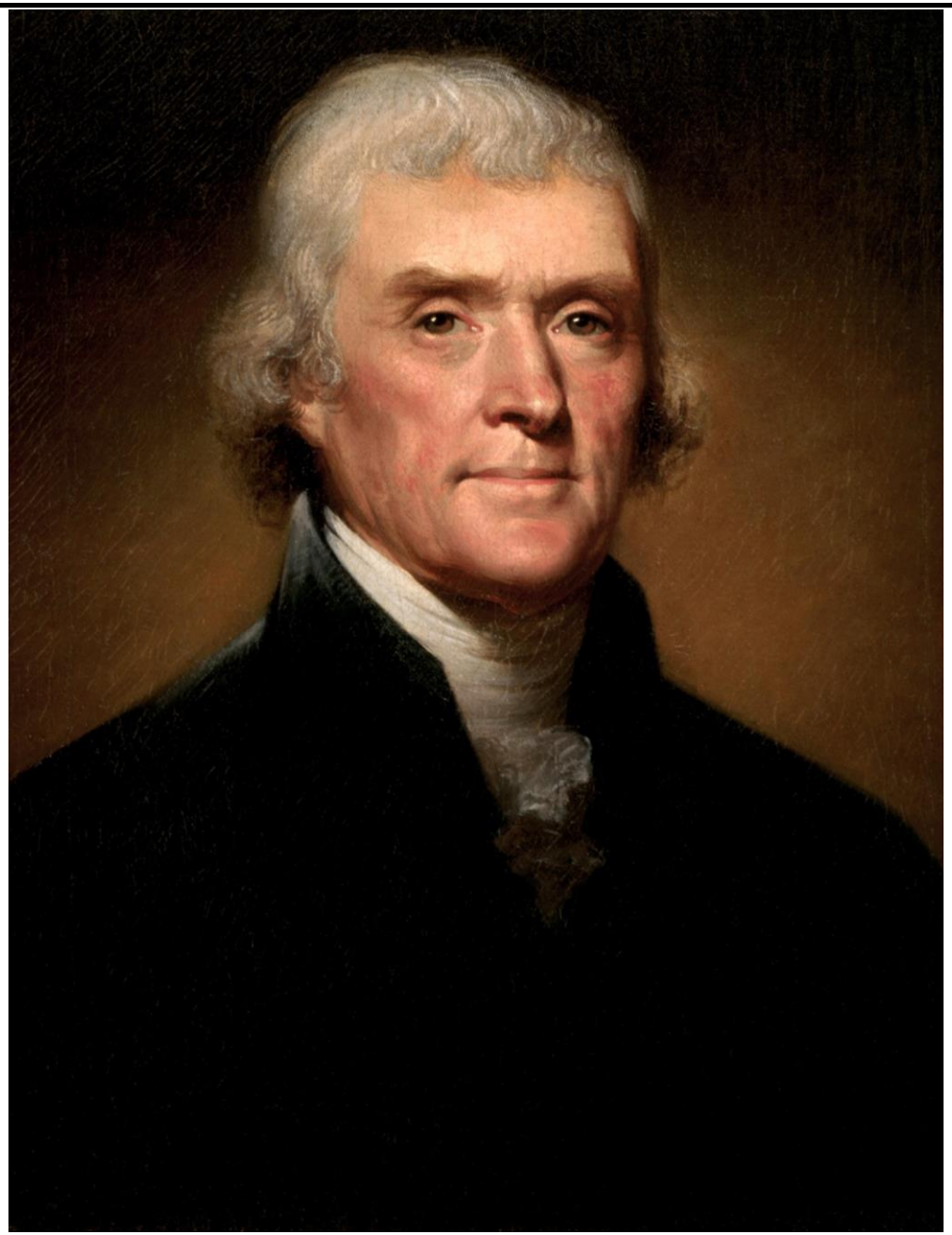
A Brief History of the American Dream



"Don't tell me you never had a chance!"

The Jeffersonian Dream:
A Nation of Independent Producers

Edward Hicks, The Cornell Farm, 1848



From *Notes on the State of Virginia, 1787, p. 175*

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phænomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistance, depend for it on the casualties and caprice of customers. Dependance begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. This, the natural progress and consequence of the arts, has sometimes perhaps been retarded by accidental circumstances: but, generally speaking, the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any state to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unfound to its healthy parts, and is a good-enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption. While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry: but, for the general operations of manufacture, let our work-shops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles. The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.

The Yeoman Farmer – the republic's backbone

John Neagle, Pat Lyon at the Forge, 1829

Abraham Lincoln, 1860: When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition; he knows that there is no fixed condition of labor, for his whole life. I am not ashamed to confess that twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flat-boat -- just what might happen to any poor man's son! [Applause.] . . . That is the true system.

But….

Junius Brutus Stearns, *Washington as a Farmer at Mount Vernon*, 1851

African American as the Antithesis of Whiteness

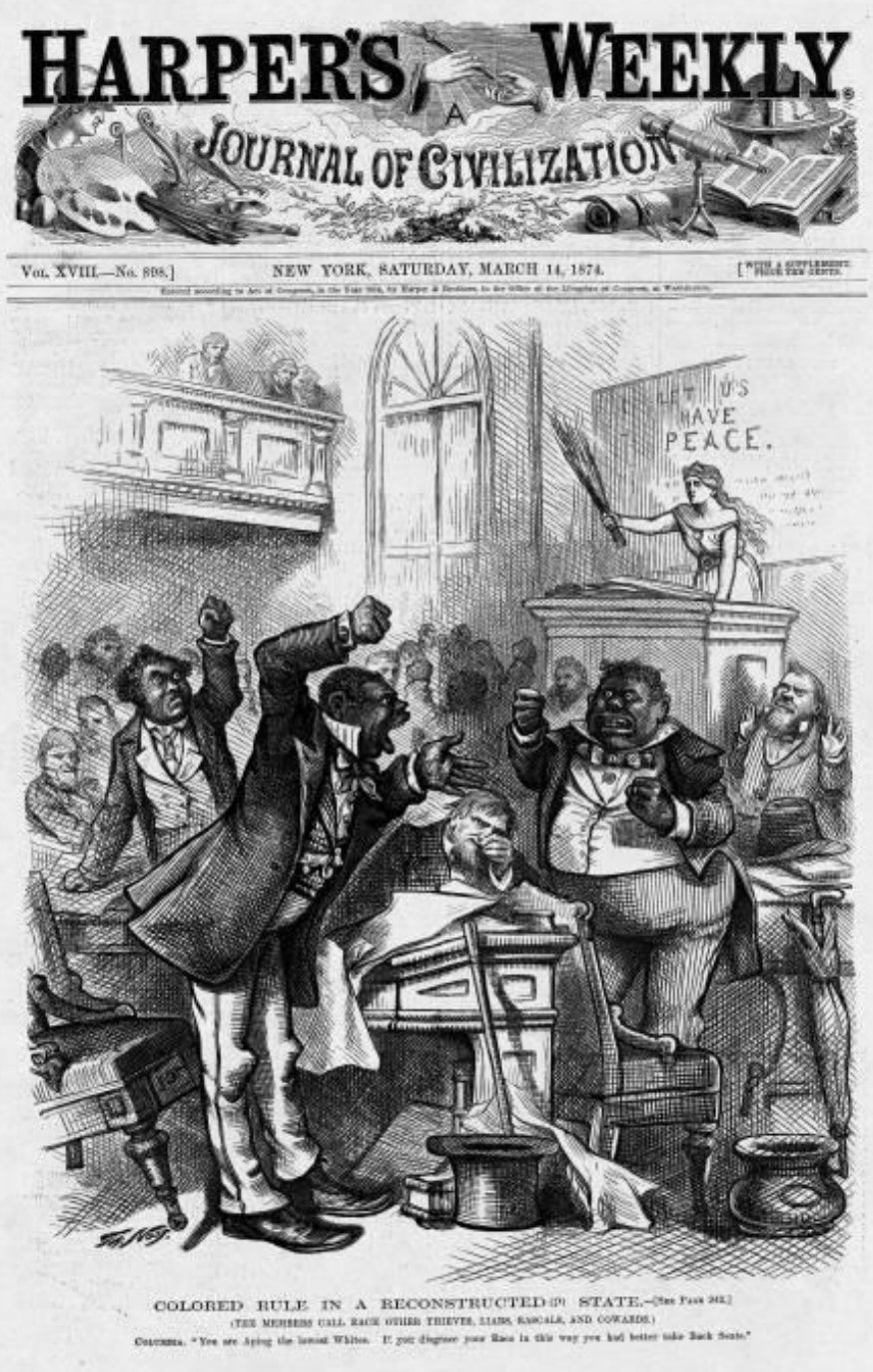
Sheet music, 1832

Thomas Nast

Emancipation might have offered African Americans some sense of inclusion….

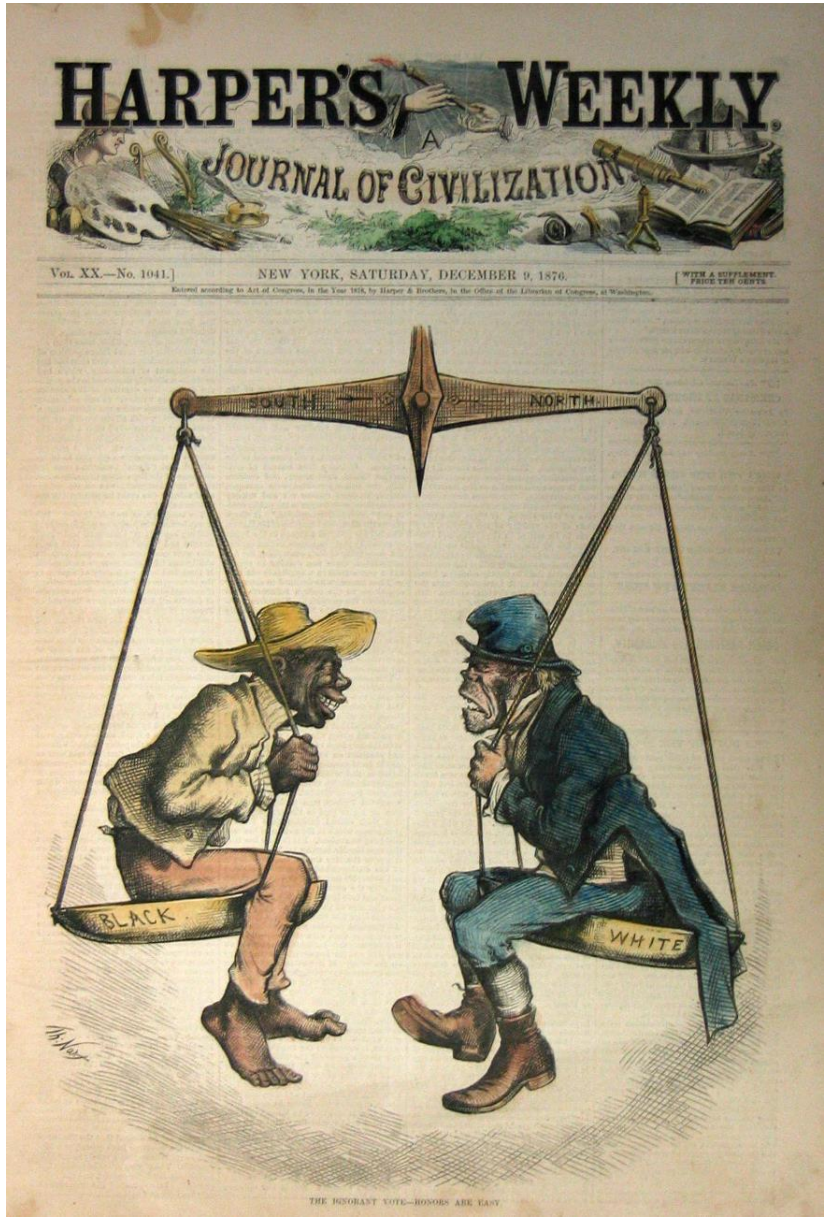
WEB DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1935:* The most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history is the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West. They descended into Hell; and in the third century they arose from the dead, in the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world had ever seen. It was a tragedy that beggared the Greek; it was an upheaval of humanity like the Reformation and the French Revolution. Yet we are blind and led by the blind. We discern in it no part of our labor movement; no part of our industrial triumph; no part of our religious experience. Before the dumb eyes of ten generations of ten million children, it is made mockery of and spit upon; a degradation of the eternal mother; a sneer at human effort; with aspiration and art deliberately and elaborately distorted. And why? Because in a day when the human mind aspired to a science of human action, a history and psychology of the mighty effort of the mightiest century, we fell under the leadership of those who would compromise with truth in the past in order to make peace in the present and guide policy in the future.

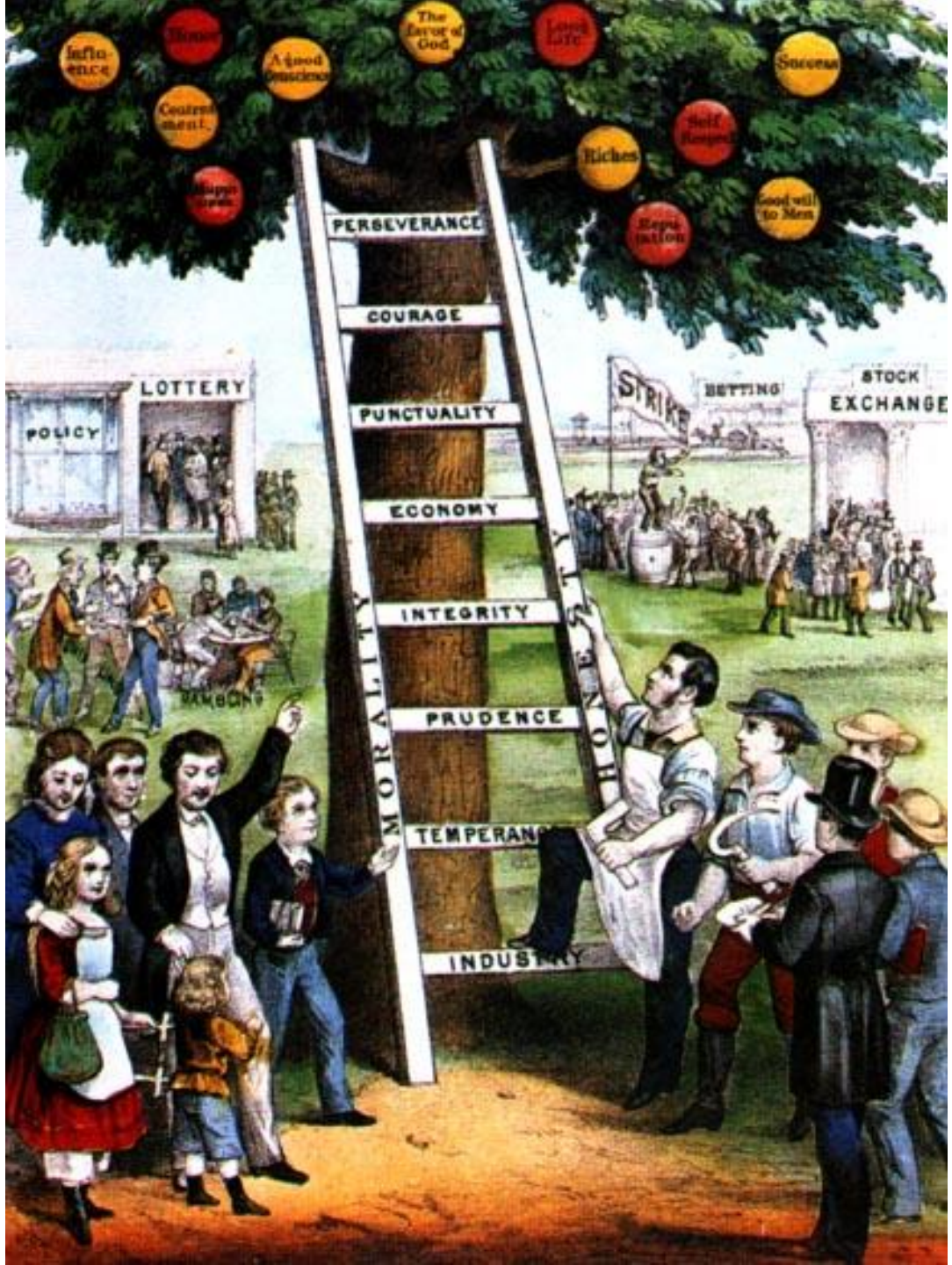

EMANCIPATION
PUBLIC SCHOOLS
CASHIER



Thomas Nast cartoons reflect white America's hardening racism towards African Americans in the years after the Civil War.

…and immigrants





Meanwhile..

Victorians Redefined the Jeffersonian Creed for New Urban Realities

Currier and Ives lithograph, 1877

And added something new: The Domestic Ideal

Gendered Expectations

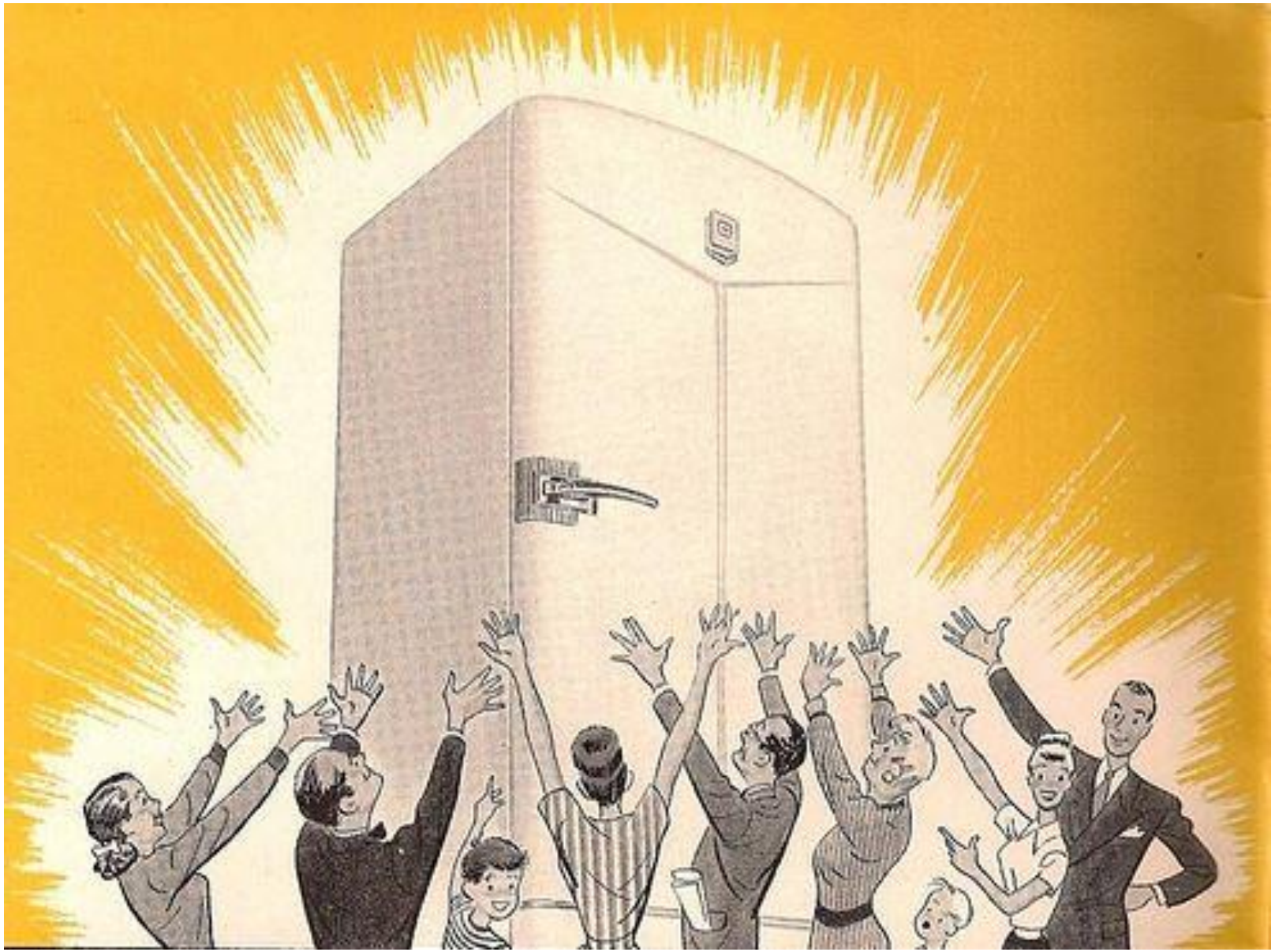
Native Americans

John Gast,
American Progress, 1872

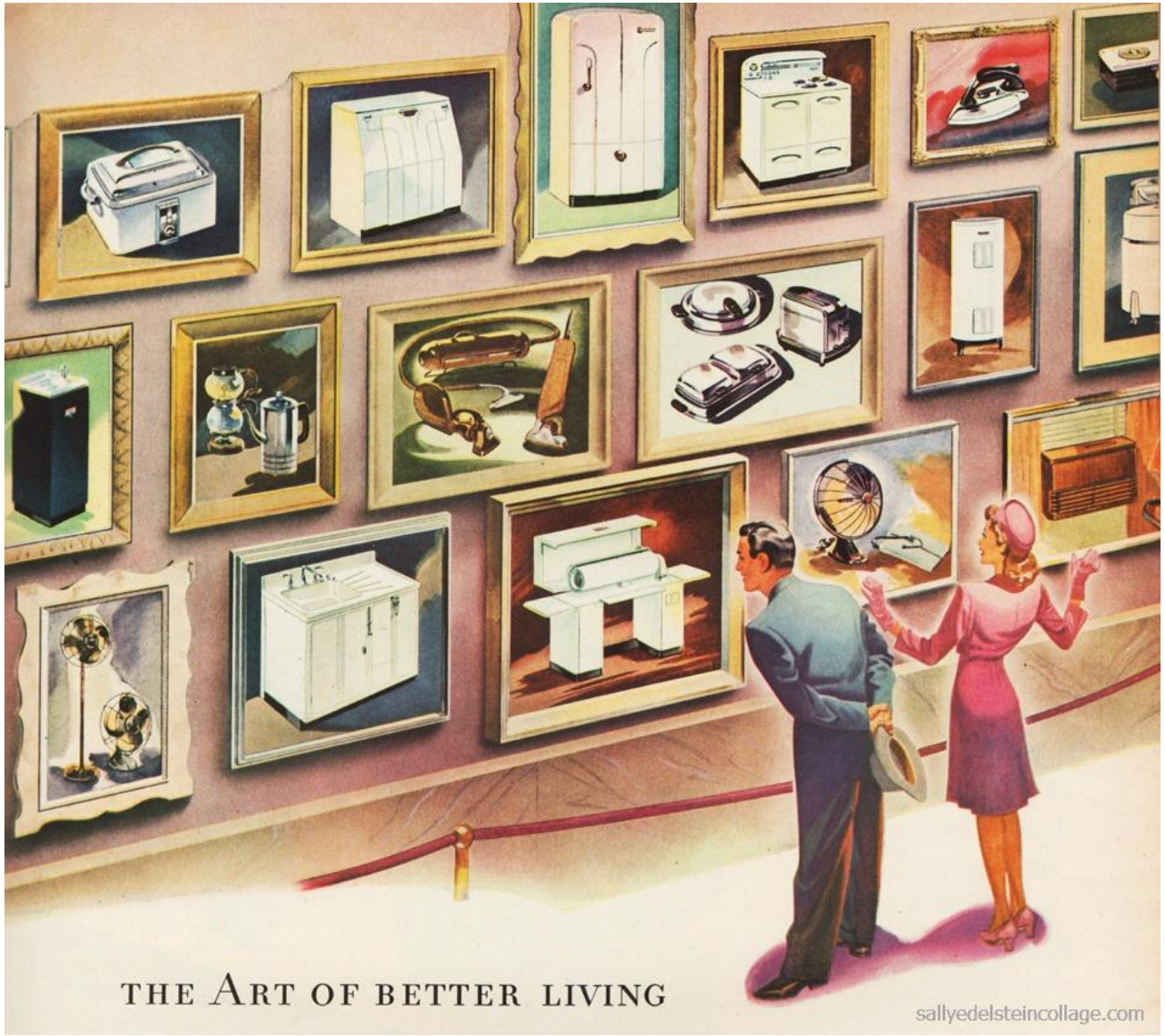
Wounded Knee Massacre, 1890

Close to 300 indigenous men, women, and children were killed in the last major military action of the Plains Wars.

The American Dream in the 20th Century



How did we get here – to this point in which material possessions largely define our self worth?



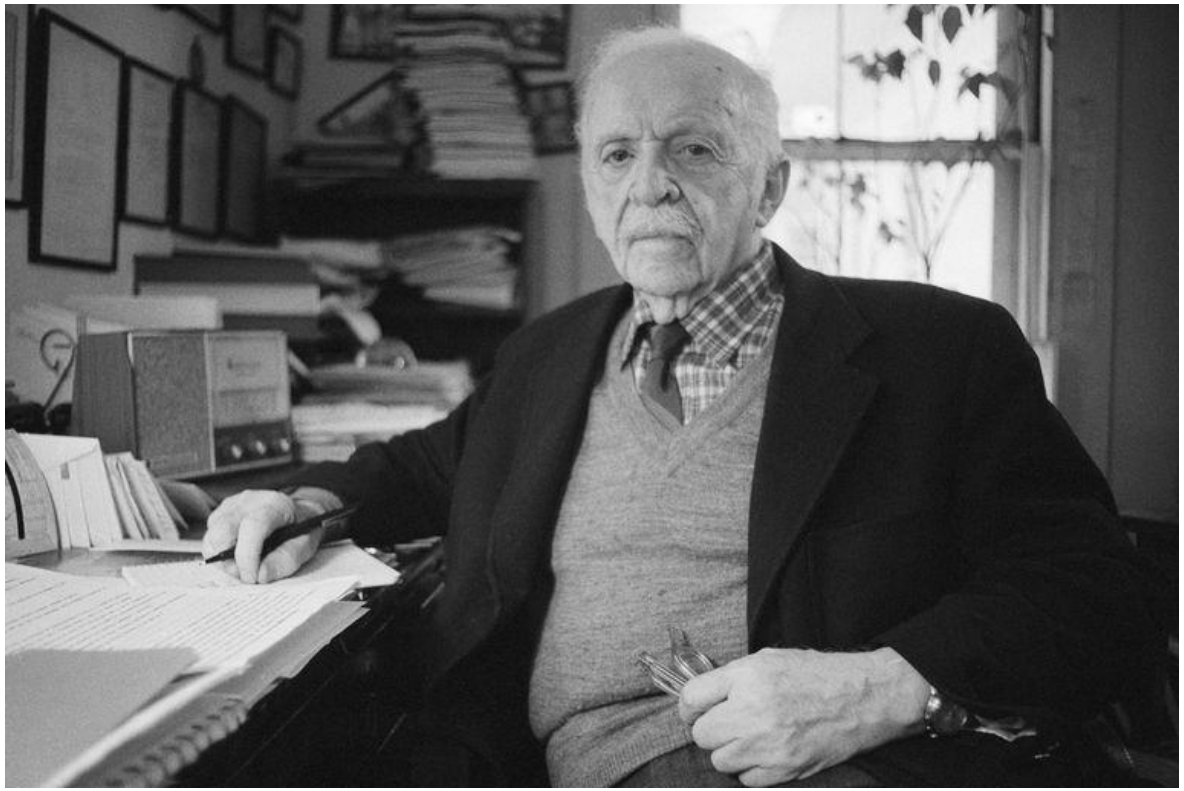
The Advertising Revolution of the 1920s

"The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. ...We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society. ...In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons...who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind."
— Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda*

Edward Bernays, father of "Public Relations," his euphemism for propaganda; author of *Propaganda,* 1928

More Bernays

“Universal literacy was supposed to educate the common man to control his environment. Once he could read and write he would have a mind fit to rule. So ran the democratic doctrine. But instead of a mind, universal literacy has given him rubber stamps, rubber stamps inked with advertising slogans, with editorials, with published scientific data, with the trivialities of the tabloids and the platitudes of history, but quite innocent of original thought. Each man's rubber stamps are the duplicates of millions of others, so that when those millions are exposed to the same stimuli, all receive identical imprints. It may seem an exaggeration to say that the American public gets most of its ideas in this wholesale fashion. The mechanism by which ideas are disseminated on a large scale is propaganda, in the broad sense of an organized effort to spread a particular belief or doctrine.”



The Art of the Sell: Modern Advertising Defines the Dream

Advertiser Bruce Barton preaches a consumer ethic of instant gratification:

Consumers should discard “the old-fashioned notion that the chief end in life is a steadily growing savings account, and that one must eliminate all pleasures from the vigorous years for possible want in old ages….Life is meant to live and enjoy as you go along…If self-denial is necessary, I’ll practice some of it when I’m old and not try to do all of it now. For who knows? I may never be old.”

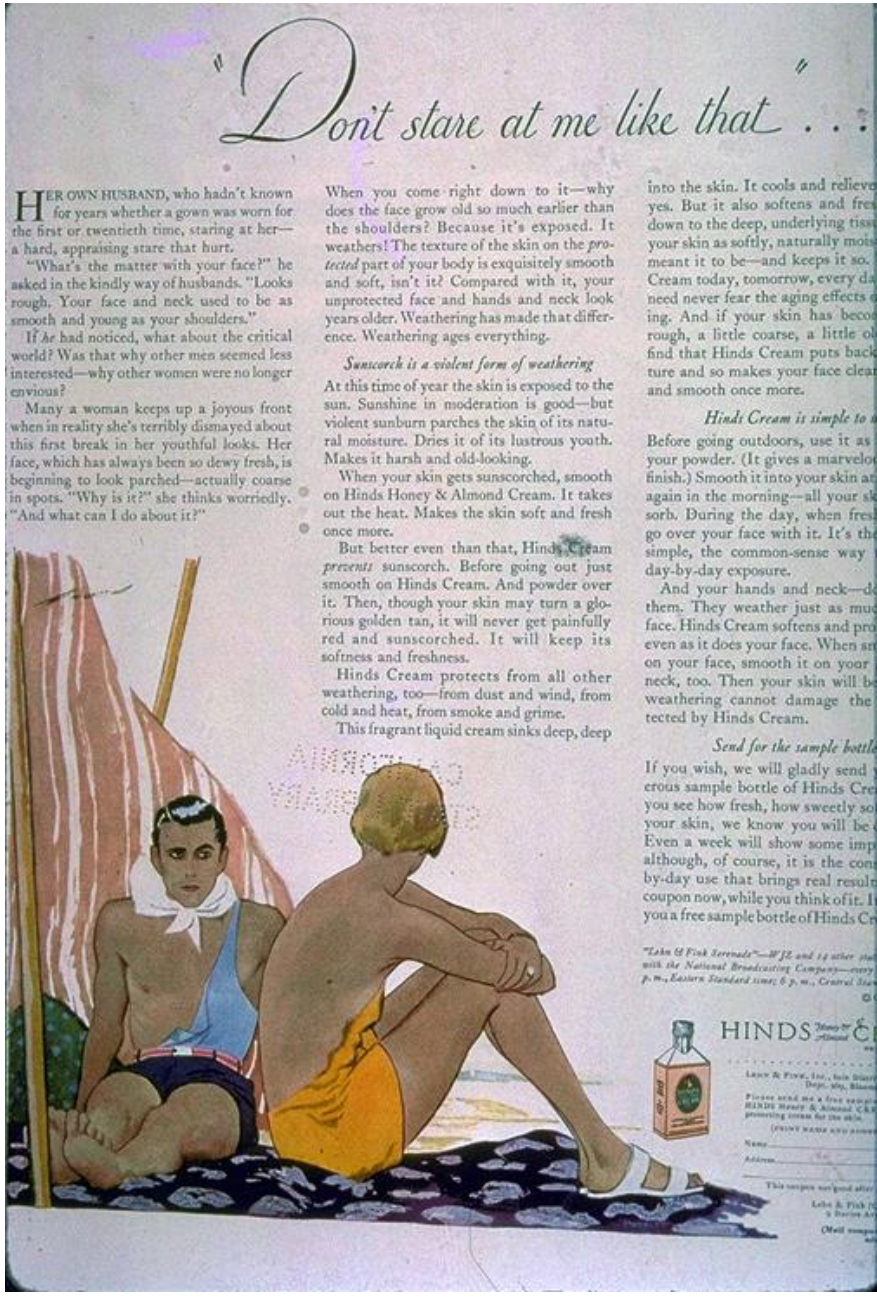
Conspicuous Consumption

Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899:

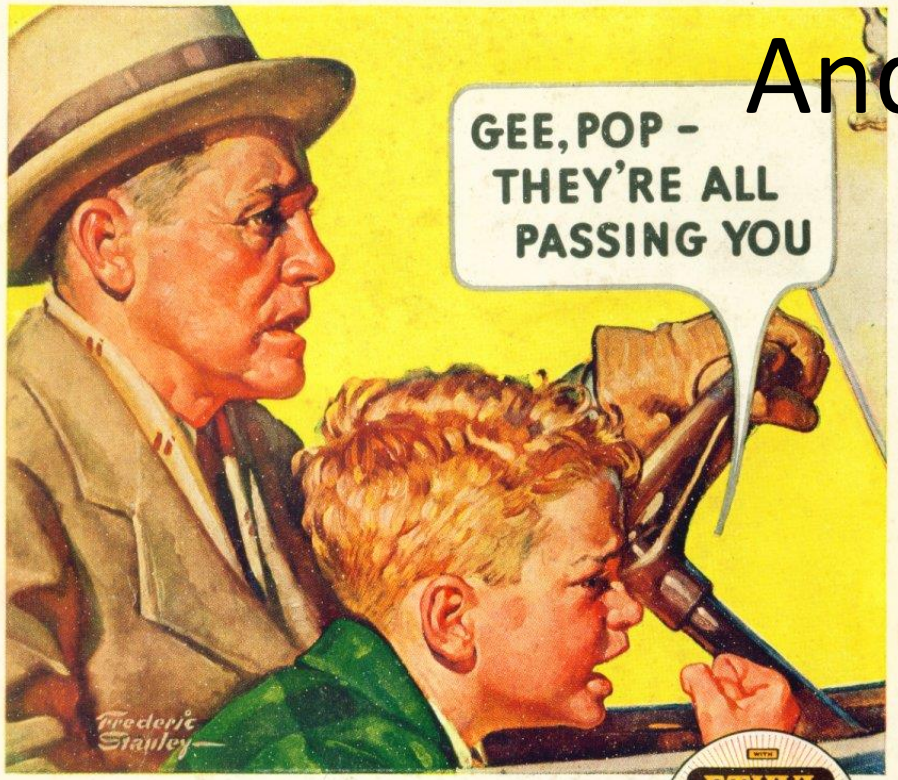
The basis on which good repute in any highly organized industrial community ultimately rests is pecuniary strength; and the means of showing pecuniary strength, and so of gaining or retaining a good name, are leisure and a conspicuous consumption of goods.

Advertising defines the Dream….but also offers new nightmares

For Women…..



And for men…



THEY didn't pass you when your car was bright and new—and you still don't like to be left behind. So just remember this: *The next best thing to a brand new car is your present car with Ethyl.*

If you buy a new high-compression car, you'll of course use Ethyl. But if you must make your old car do, give it Ethyl and feel lost youth and power come back as harmful knock and sluggishness disappear.

These days, when we have to do without so many things, we can at least make the most of our cars. And even if you don't measure the fun of driving in dollars and cents, you'll find that Ethyl makes real money savings in lessened repair bills. Ethyl Gasoline Corporation, New York.

WITH ETHYL — ETHYL GASOLINE CORPORATION NEW YORK, U.S.A. — THE WORLD'S HIGHEST QUALITY MOTOR FUEL

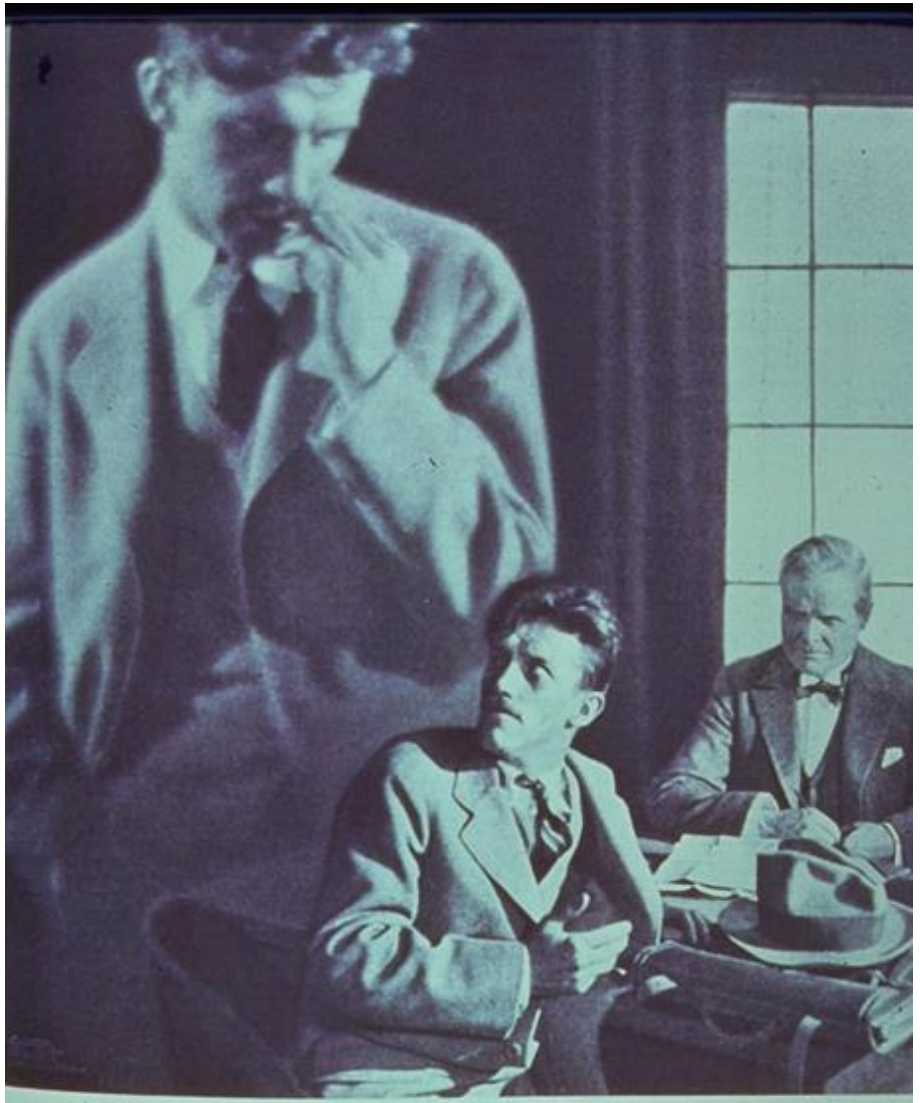
Ethyl fluid contains lead. © E. G. C. 1933

BEWARE OF IMITATIONS

All Ethyl Gasoline is red, but not all red gasolines contain Ethyl fluid. The color is for identification only and adds nothing to performance. Look for this Ethyl emblem on the pump (or its globe).

The all-round quality of Ethyl is doubly tested: at the time of its mixing, and through inspection of samples taken from pumps. Ethyl's margin of anti-knock quality over regular gasoline is greater today than ever before.

NEXT TIME STOP AT THE **ETHYL** PUMP



He had to fight himself so hard…

he didn't put it over

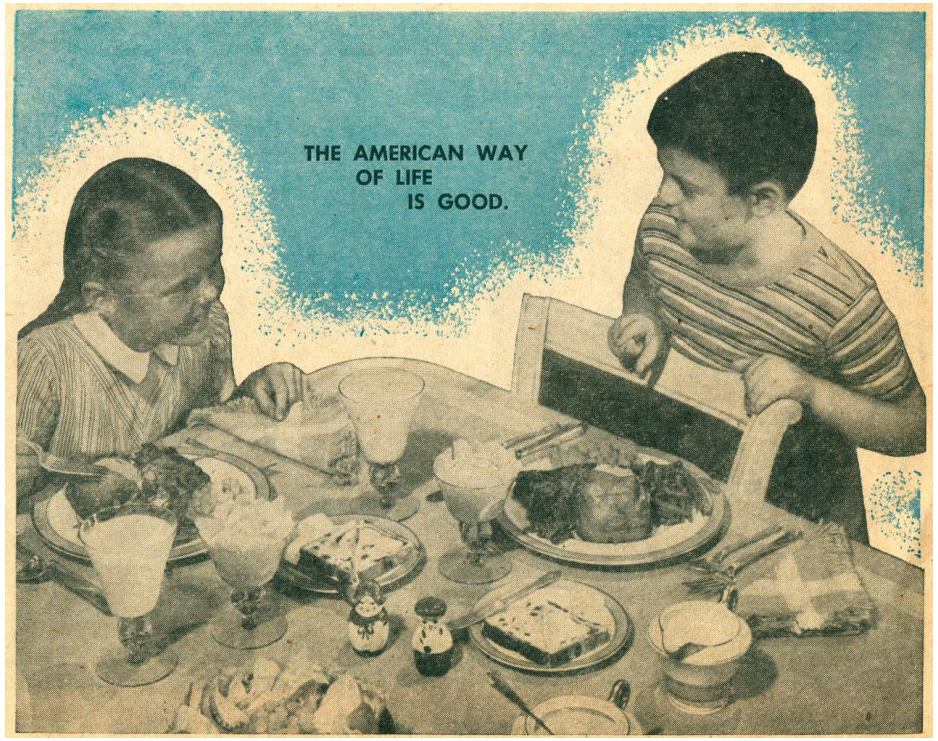
YES, he was his own worst enemy. His appearance was against him and he knew it. Oh why had he neglected the bath that morning, the shave, the change of linen? Under the other fellow's gaze it was hard to forget that cheap feeling.

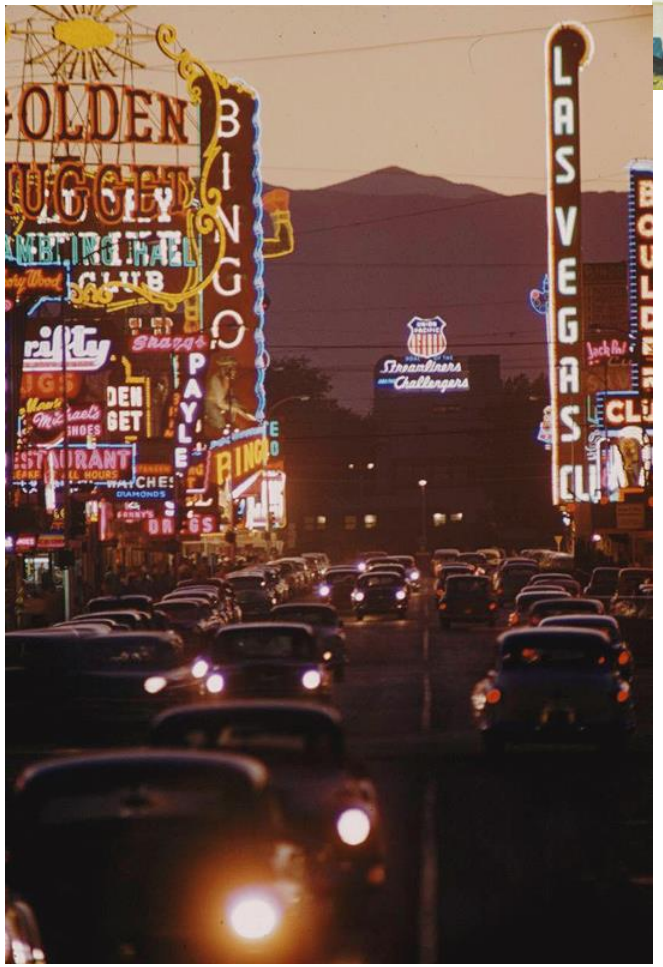
There's self-respect in soap and water. The clean-cut chap can look any man in the face and tell him the facts—for when you're clean, your appearance fights *for* you.

There's self-respect in SOAP & WATER

SPONSORED BY THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN SOAP AND GLYCERINE PRODUCERS, INC., TO AID THE WORK OF CLEANLINESS INSTITUTE

Post World War II Abundance





We feel the effects of all this as we try to define the American Dream for ourselves

1. Success Has Become Supersized

6.5 oz.

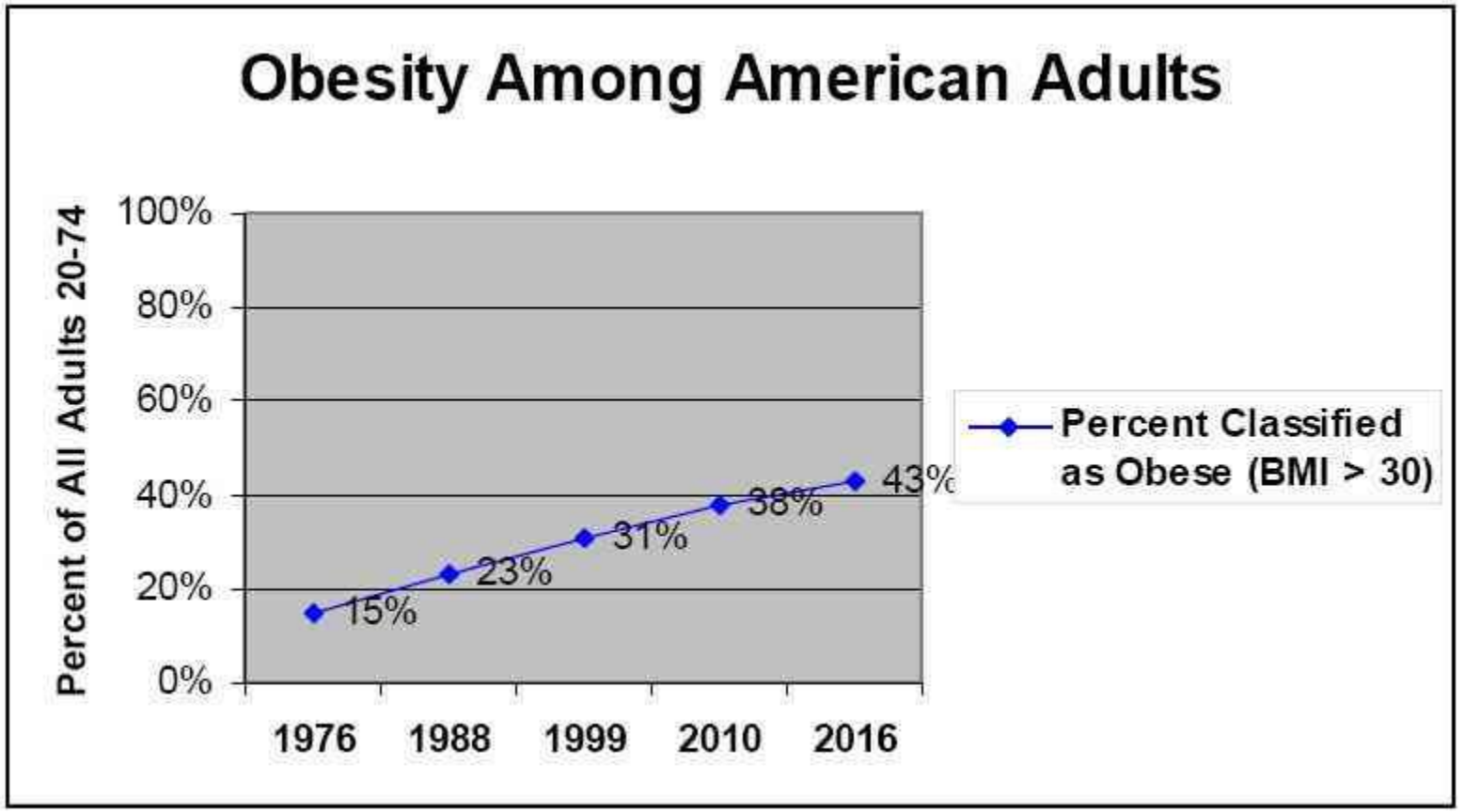
Coke can: 12 US fl oz.
The Big Gulp: 32 US fl oz.
Super Big Gulp: 44 US fl oz.
Double Gulp: 64 US fl oz.
Extreme Gulp: 54 US fl oz.
Team Gulp (not shown): 128 US fl oz.

The average adult stomach can hold approximately 32 oz. of fluid at one time


Fifth Third Burger
Nutrition Facts
Serving Size: Huge
Servings 1
Amount Per Serving
Calories 4889
% Daily Value*
Total Fat 299.5g 460%
Saturated Fat 119.2g 597%
Cholesterol 744.6g 248%
Sodium 10887.9mg 454%
Total Carbs 354.9g 118%
Fiber 17.9g 72%
Sugars 37.3g
Protein 198.7g 397%
Total Flavor 1000%
*Percent Daily Value based on a 2,000 calorie diet.

Fenton's Ice Creamery: Oakland, California

Super-sized Adults

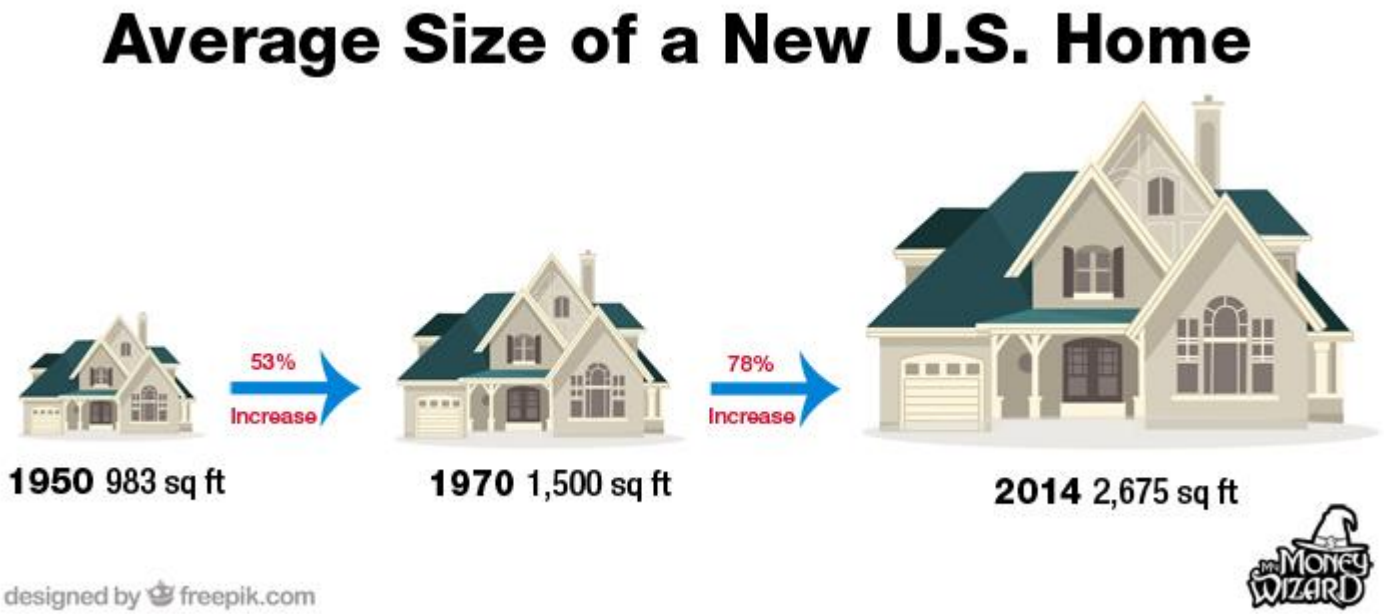



GUCCI
ANEL

The Shrinking Family v. The Growing Home Size

Year	# in HH	Sq Ft	Sq Ft/Person
1950	3.38	1,000	296
1960	3.29	1,200	365
1970	3.11	1,400	450
1980	2.75	1,570	571
1990	2.63	2,080	791
2000	2.59	2,200	849
2007	2.55	2,400	941

Source: Census Bureau



McMansions – Palm Springs

Holton-Hooker Center at Grand Valley State University circa 1968

The dorm is being replaced by the living center.

Niemeyer Living Center, GVSU

My ancestral home

Transformed into a McMansion

Oprah Winfrey's Estate

Toys For the Rich: c. 1990

The Kingdom 5KR (formally *The Trump Princess*) is 282 feet long, cost $100-million to build, and was once owned by Donald Trump. When it was delivered it had five decks, a disco, a cinema with seats for 12 and 2 double beds, 11 opulent suites, a helipad on top (its smoke stacks are sloped outward to avoid interference with the helicopters), a pool with a water jet on top in front of the heliport, 2 Riva tenders, a crew of 48, a top speed of 20 knots, and cruising speed of 17.5 knots

Toys For the Rich: Now

590 feet long
Cost: $600 million

Rumored to have a 6,000 square foot lounge, 50 suites, a submarine, and a missile defense system.

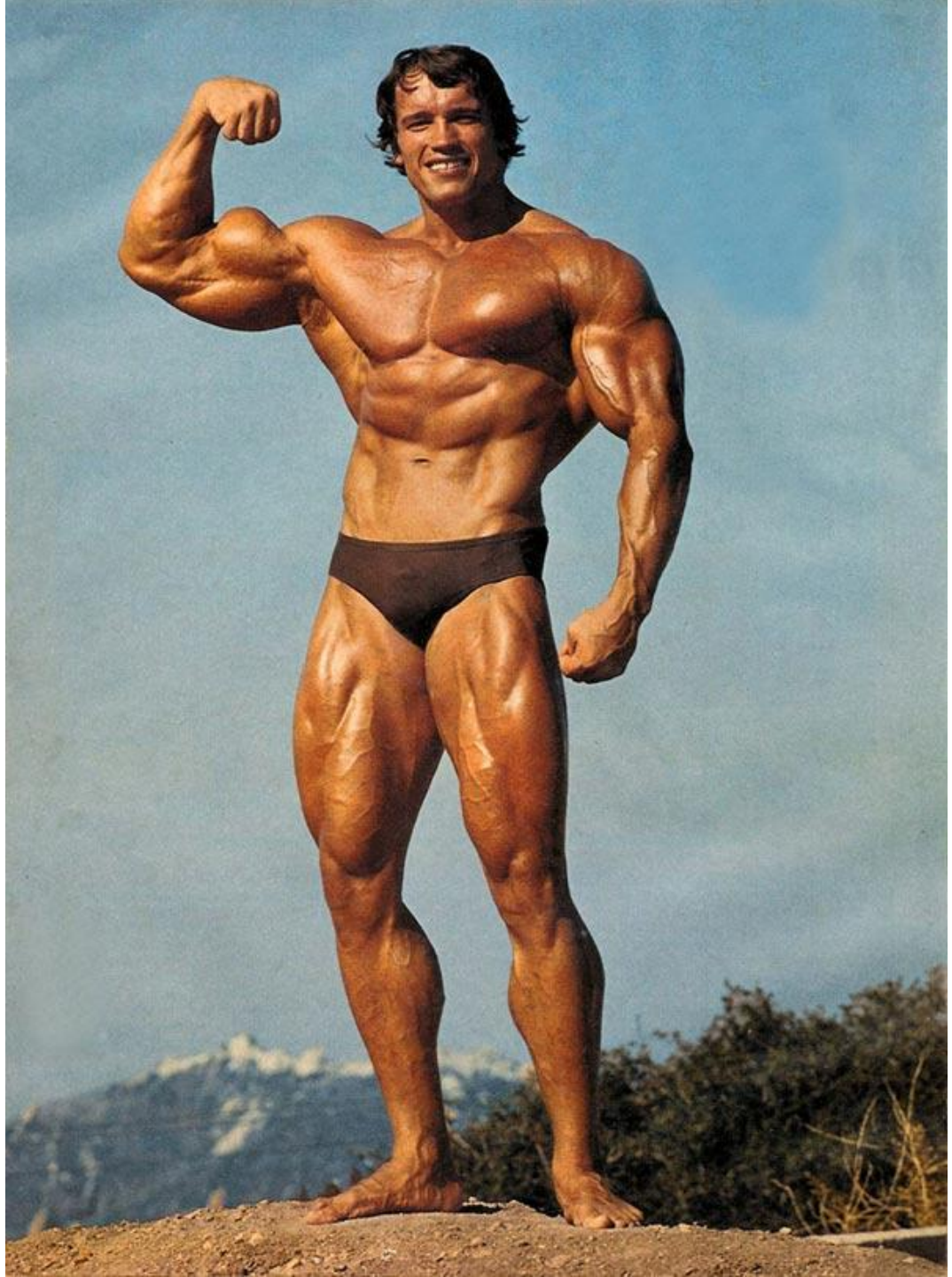
Owner: the president of the United Arab Emirates

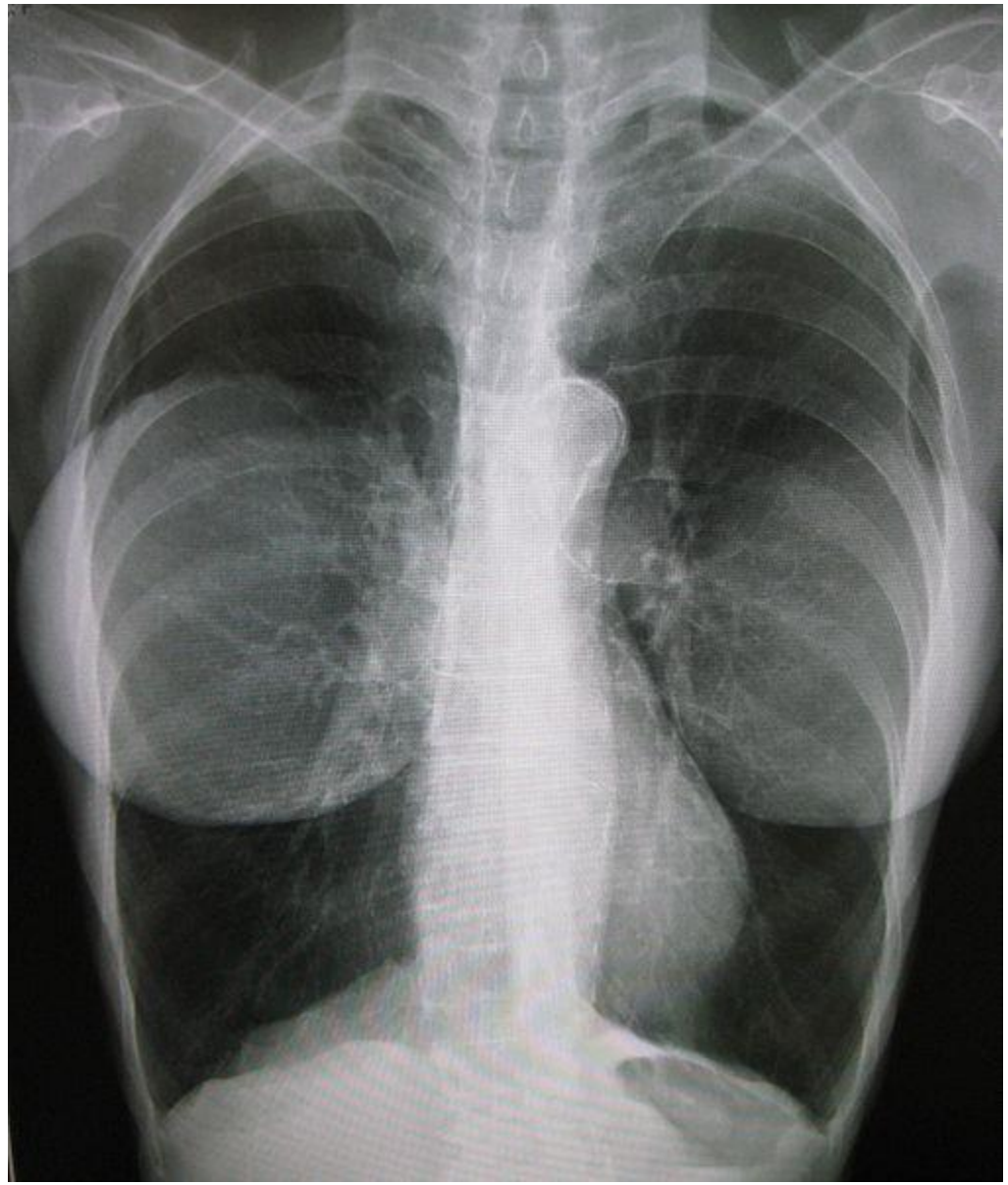
To avoid taxation, the yacht is listed as a charter yacht, though it is not available for charter.

Gulfstream 700: The largest and most expensive private jet in the world.
Cost: “75 million

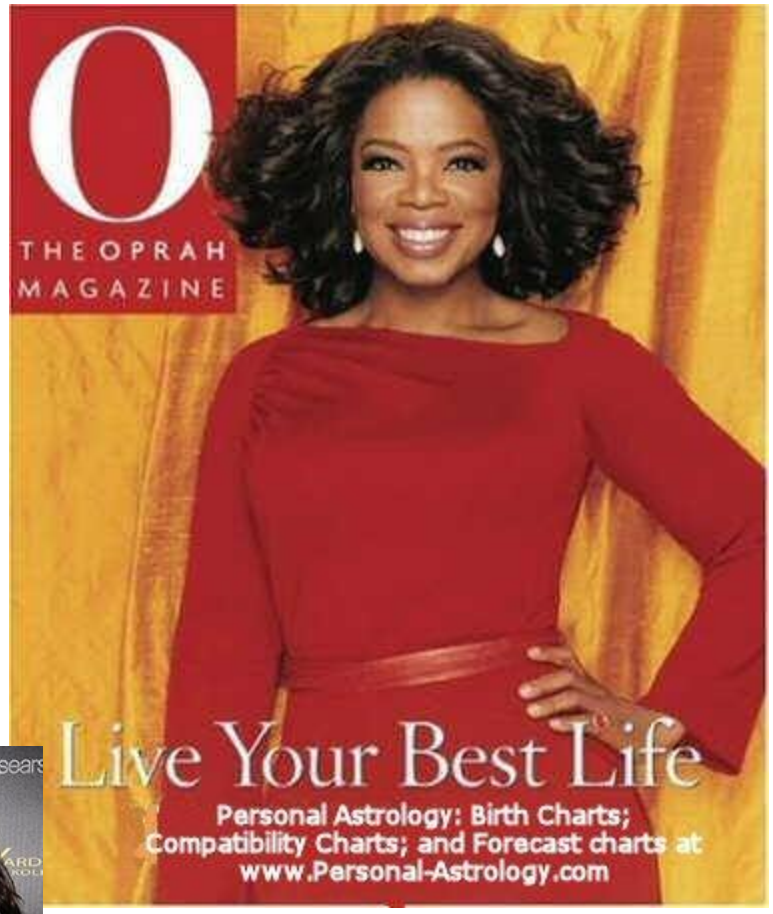
Betsy DeVos family owns 12 private jets: 1 Boeing Business Jet, 5 Gulfstream G550's, 1 Gulfstream G450, 2 Bombardier Challenger 350's, 3 Cessna Citation CJ4’s.

The family also owns 4 helicopters and ten yachts. All the yachts are registered in the Cayman Islands to avoid taxes.





Super-Sized Egos?



What does it all mean?

- Inequality and exclusion have been basic features of the American Dream from the nation's outset
- BUT at least the American Dream was once connected to and helped bolster basic notions of American republicanism.
- American Dream once encapsulated values of character and altruism as much as material reward
- Materialism has become the centerpiece of the Dream, at least in much of our popular culture.
- We accept gross inequalities – inequalities that run counter to our basic values of fairness and justice – for the sake of the Dream. As such, pursuit of the Dream may actually harm the republic
- Time to reformulate the Dream?