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The Dark Side of the American Dream: Individual Agency, Hard Work, and Public Mass Shootings

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

By
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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Section I A: The Protestant Reformation - Individual Agency.....	4
Section I B: The Protestant Reformation - Hard Work & Self-Discipline.....	10
Section II: Calvin’s Successors.....	13
Section III: The First Great Awakening.....	18
Section IV A: Reading Primers as Pro-Protestant, Anti-Catholic Messengers.....	25
Section IV B: Horace Mann, the Puritans, and Benjamin Franklin.....	27
Section IV C: Non-Sectarian as Anti-Catholic.....	31
Section IV D: Making Americans.....	34
Section V A: Bruce Barton and the Re-Forging of Jesus Christ.....	36
Section V B: American Exceptionalism and Winning as the Dominant Cultural Trait.....	40
Section VI A: Public Mass Shooters as Failures.....	43
Section VI B: Fame-Seeking Shooters.....	49
Section VII: Limitations of the Current Study.....	53
Section VIII: Conclusion.....	53
Works Cited.....	57

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Abstract

This project traces the origins and continuing existence of the American Dream. The American Dream refers to the belief that hard work will result in success and upward mobility for future generations. In other words, American culture views each individual as the master of their own destiny, provided they work hard. Though America's culture has changed drastically over the course of its history, and differs greatly between various groups, the American Dream is a concept which runs deep in the minds of Americans to this day. This project starts the American Dream's timeline during the Protestant Reformation, then continues on to the Puritans of New England and the First Great Awakening, the start of the American public educational system, and the development of fame-obsession and celebrity culture. Importantly, this project will also show the manifestations and effects of the American Dream, including Public Mass Shootings.

Introduction

The "American Dream" is the most popular term for America's dominant cultural idea. Hard work, determination, and grit are the keys to this dream, which promises success to its dreamers. More formally stated, the American Dream is the concept that every American has an equal opportunity to succeed, provided that they work hard. The exact definition of success has changed over time and varies from person to person. For the immigrants who came to America during the late nineteenth century, success meant overcoming poverty and providing a better life for their children. For American citizens after World War II, the American Dream's promise of success meant homeownership, education, and a good job. For Americans today, that dream is changing and its future is uncertain. Whatever the future of the American Dream holds, the fact remains that its history and its existence have shaped and continue to shape American culture as it pushes Americans to pursue success. This drive for success has not only led to great industrial accomplishments by those who achieved the American Dream but also violent backlash by some of those who fell short of the Dream.

Like most things considered quintessentially American, the American Dream did not originate in the United States of America. Its origins lie in Europe during the Protestant Reformation. Thinkers like Martin Luther and John Calvin formulated ideas that gave agency to common parishioners and promoted belief that industriousness was second only to faithfulness in the eyes of God. Eventually, men of great purpose took these foundational ideas with them on their voyage to New England in 1630. There, their own beliefs regarding individual agency, discipline, and hard work took form. Through many generations, the movers and shakers of this new American culture--Winthrop, Edwards, Franklin, and Mann, to name a few--took those early Protestant beliefs and distilled out of them what Americans came to call the American Dream.

This paper not only seeks to trace the origins of the American Dream from the Protestant Reformation, but also to show how the beliefs that became the American Dream reached the American masses and became a cultural institution. It is easy to show how the ideas of the Protestant Reformation affected Puritan culture in 17th century New England. It is quite another to show how those beliefs spread across the entire country and stayed relevant through the centuries. Evidence of the American Dream's early incarnations are present in America's earliest religious beliefs, as well as the ways in which America's public school system taught American children to think. America's founding religious ideals helped to create and solidify the American Dream, while the educational system dispersed and reproduced it.

After discussing the basic chronology of the American Dream, my focus will shift to the manifestations and effects of the American Dream on American culture, with a specific focus on mass public shootings. The American Dream has a dark side and has influenced many mass public shooters--also called rampage, school, or workplace shooters--and contributes to their motivations for committing their crime. For some, believing that their hard work will result in

success can be dangerous. When these future shooters work hard but fail to achieve success, those with certain predisposing factors--among them, mental illness and having successful family members--turn their disappointment, anger, and hatred outward. The promise of success after death, usually in the form of fame in the media, entices those individuals into committing the unspeakable crimes Americans hear about so often on the news. Through these violent actions, these individuals finally fulfill the American Dream.

Much of the material for this paper comes from primary sources from each time period discussed. The Protestant Reformation section relies heavily on the writings of Luther and Calvin, while the Puritan and First Great Awakening sections rely heavily on sermons and religious writings. Naturally, the section on mass public shootings relies heavily on the writings and video recordings of the shooters themselves. All sections also rely on secondary scholarship from scholars such as Diarmaid MacCulloch, Max Weber, and Adam Lankford, to name a few. For certain topics, such as mass public shootings, I stepped outside the field of history and consulted the work of criminologists and sociologists for a cross-disciplinary approach that lends a more practiced lens to the topic.

Section I A: The Protestant Reformation - Individual Agency

Leaders of the Protestant Reformation created ideas which laid the groundwork for the American Dream. The beliefs which leaders such as Martin Luther and John Calvin created led their followers to acknowledge and value their own individual agency. Individual agency is a key concept that supports the American Dream. If each individual has power over their destiny, they have the power to succeed. The specific ideas which created this belief in individual agency are: eucharistic beliefs and the priesthood of all believers. Luther's* and Calvin's beliefs on the

sacrament of eucharist focused more on each individual congregant, rather than the priest.

Luther's belief in the priesthood of all believers gave the power to read and interpret the Bible to each Christian, and away from the Catholic Church. The belief among Protestants that they could take control of their own religious life combined with the later Puritanical emphasis on hard work to create the notion that hard work was every individual's key to taking control of their own life. That notion, in turn, helped create the American Dream.

Eucharist was one of the most important sacraments to the Catholic Church, and therefore a natural target for the Protestant Reformation. Catholic belief held that the bread and wine became the literal body and blood of Jesus Christ. The Catholic Church outlined its beliefs in Chapter IV of the Council of Trent's Thirteenth Session, stating:

“[T]herefore has it ever been a firm belief in the Church of God...that, by the consecration of the bread and of the wine, a conversion is made of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of His blood”¹

Importantly, the priest's consecration (“by the consecration...a conversion is made”) is what actually transforms the elements into the body and blood of Christ. Therefore the priest is actually at the center of the Eucharist, because without him, there would be no miracle of transubstantiation, and no actual Eucharist. In the Catholic Eucharistic practice, all of the power lies with the priest, while none lies with the common congregants.

¹ The Council of Trent the Thirteenth Session, *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, edited and translated by J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), accessed April 5, 2016, <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct13.html>

John Calvin, a man whose beliefs formed the foundations of Puritanism, had a different theory in regard to Eucharist. Calvin believed that the key relationship in Eucharist was between Christ and the person receiving the Eucharist. Calvin did not believe that the bread and wine were the literal flesh and blood of Christ, but also did not adhere to Huldrych Zwingli's belief that Eucharist was merely a memorial of the original Last Supper. Rather, to Calvin, the actual Eucharistic elements were symbols which invited the spirit of Christ into their recipients, provided that recipient was truly among the faithful. In Calvin's own words: "[T]ruly the thing there signified he exhibits and offers to all who sit down at that spiritual feast, although it is beneficially received by believers *only who receive this great benefit with true faith and heartfelt gratitude.* (emphasis mine)"² Calvin argued that the Eucharist only meant something if the person receiving it was a faithful Christian. A believer could eat the bread and drink the wine and by so doing invite the spirit of Christ into them. To the false believer or massive sinner, the bread and wine are just bread and wine. The priest's blessing makes no difference in Calvinist belief, because no matter how faithful the priest is, the bread and wine are just empty symbols without a faithful recipient among God's elect.

Why is this difference in Eucharist important to the American Dream? The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation puts all of the power into the priests, and none of the power into the common congregants. Calvin's belief, however, puts all of the power in the hands of the congregants. While the priest still has to consecrate the elements, the faith of the congregant is the important part. Each individual only gets out of Eucharist what they put into it. The concept that an individual has a mastery over their own lives is crucial to the American Dream.

² John Calvin, *Institutes on the Christian Religion*, accessed April 5, 2016, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes>, pg 833.

The Catholic Church of the early modern period was one of the most hierarchical and bureaucratized entities in Europe. Just as in the feudal system, everyone knew where they stood in relation to each other. At the bottom were the congregants, then the priests, then the bishops and archbishops, then the cardinals, then the pope, and then God. In such a system, the congregant knew that their religious lives were under the strict control of the Catholic Church. Only those in the clergy could receive confessions and actually commune with God, hence why Catholics confess their sins to a priest. Additionally, due to the Catholic tradition of only producing the Bible in Latin, only the educated priests who knew Latin could read, let alone interpret, the Bible. The Tridentine Creed, as laid out in the papal Bull from Pope Pius IV, *Injunctum Nobis* in 1564, was a profession of faith that all new converts to the Church had to recite.³ It lists statements that all members of the Catholic Church must agree with, including:

“I also admit the Holy Scripture according to that sense which our holy mother the Church hath held, and doth hold, to whom it belongeth to judge of the true sense and interpretations of the Scriptures. Neither will I ever take and interpret them otherwise than according to the unanimous consent of the Fathers.”⁴

Essentially, Catholic congregants are not allowed to view or interpret the scriptures in any way other than that which the Church officially sanctioned.

³ “The Tridentine Profession of Faith, 1564,” *Documents of the Christian Church*, edited by Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), accessed April 5, 2016
https://books.google.com/books?id=IwsLp8zj3D8C&pg=PA270&lpg=PA270&dq=tridentine+profession+of+faith&source=bl&ots=N0sS8HIBLH&sig=Jxpt_EL-9UNfROHsCwFa1ivSTKc&hl=en&sa=X&ei=swXEUumCJM3Y7AbSrYCwBA#v=onepage&q=tridentine%20profession%20of%20faith&f=false

⁴ “The Tridentine Creed,” accessed April 5, 2016,
http://www.traditionalcatholic.net/Tradition/Prayer/Tridentine_Creed.html

This notion contrasts with the belief of a priestly laity, as championed by Martin Luther. According to this belief, every Christian was, in a sense, a priest. Luther summed up his beliefs on the matter in his *Weimar Ausgabe*:

As for the unction by a pope or a bishop, tonsure, ordination, consecration, and clothes differing from those of laymen—all this may make a hypocrite or an anointed puppet, but never a Christian or a spiritual man. Thus we are all consecrated as priests by baptism, as St. Peter says: "Ye are a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Peter ii. 9); and in the book of Revelations: "and hast made us unto our God (by Thy blood) kings and priests" (Rev. v. 10)⁵

Here, Luther says that the fancy titles and accoutrements of the Catholic priesthood do not make them any better Christians than a peasant in rags. To Luther, every baptized Christian is a priest capable of communing with God and reading the Bible to one's own interpretation.

Luther's argument is absolutely vital. It goes hand in hand with his belief in vernacular Bibles, because if every person is a priest, then they should all be able to read the Bible. Not only did Luther's belief spur education in Protestant areas, but it also led to self-empowerment. Whereas a Catholic needed a priest or a saint to communicate with God, a Protestant could pray and confess their sins directly to God. In fact one Protestant called the act of praying to saints—rather than to God himself—a "Popish [toy] to pacify God."⁶ Whereas a Catholic needed a priest to read and interpret the Bible, a Protestant could read and interpret the Bible for themselves. It is easy to understand how these beliefs lent themselves to the American Dream. Each individual had

⁵ Martin Luther, "Address to the Nobility of the German Nation, 1520," accessed April 5, 2016, <https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/luther-nobility.asp>

⁶ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 539.

greater agency over their religious life and had improved access to education. The early American settlers in New England, for example, were “possibly the most literate society then existing in the world.”⁷ Education and religious life were of such importance to the early European settlers in America that just 16 years after landing in Plymouth, they founded Harvard University (then New College) in 1636.⁸ The Puritans of New England believed that they controlled their religious lives, which in turn created the concept within the later American culture that individuals could control their lives holistically.

Before continuing on to the concepts of hard work and individual self-discipline, it is important to clarify some important points. First, the fact that Luther and Calvin preached concepts which eventually contributed to the American Dream does not mean that every Lutheran or Calvinist immediately took charge of their lives and became early modern Americans. The ideas which Luther and Calvin championed were incredibly controversial in their own time and took time to gain support and traction. In fact, it was only after the heavy experimentation with and subsequent transformation of Calvinist and Lutheran beliefs that they came to resemble what the Puritans of New England knew believed. Another 150 years of experiments, transformations, wars, and revolutions produced the American religious identity which then began to influence the formation of the American Dream.

Second, to echo Diarmaid MacCulloch and Perry Miller, neither the Protestants of early modern Europe nor the Puritans of New England were individualists. Even those Protestants who wholeheartedly accepted Luther’s belief in a priestly laity did not believe that they were individuals whose rights were superior to the rights of the community. Rather, their individual agency focused more on the ability of a common person--or a group of common people--to take

⁷ MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 520

⁸ MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 518.

control of their lives from the elite. Thus, the transformation concerned elite versus non-elite, not individualism versus communalism. The Puritans of New England actively disagreed with democracy and freedom of conscience, which are incredibly important aspects of individualism as it currently manifests in America.⁹ In short, the early Protestants and the later Puritans in the New England colonies did not practice individualism.

Section I B: The Protestant Reformation - Hard Work & Self-Discipline

Individual self-discipline is not a uniquely Protestant trait. The leaders of the Protestant Reformation did not invent the concept of self-discipline, nor is that concept exclusive to Protestant theology. However, few other religious institutions ingrained self-discipline so thoroughly into their everyday practice and philosophy as did Protestantism. Calvinism, the original belief system which spawned the Puritans and Presbyterians, focused on individual self-discipline more than any other mainstream branch of Protestantism. Thus, when the Puritans came to America in the 1600s, they brought with them beliefs on discipline which they continued to mold in their new home.

Calvin's belief in double predestination provided the social backdrop for a later belief in self-discipline. In his *Institutes on the Christian Religion*, Calvin defines his belief regarding predestination as follows: "[b]y predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation."¹⁰ Unlike Luther, Calvin specifically pointed out that just as God predestined some for Heaven, he

⁹ Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 160.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes on the Christian Religion*, 2206.

predestined others for damnation. Calvin went so far as to say that the vast majority of people were going to Hell.¹¹ Additionally, Calvin preached that there was nothing anyone could do about it because the decision was completely up to God. That belief absolutely terrified Calvinists, including Calvin himself.¹² Calvin also believed that to even question God's motives for predestination was equivalent to sacrilege, saying that "whenever the Lord shuts his sacred mouth, he also desists from inquiry"¹³ Meaning that Christians had to not only be disciplined within their actions, but also disciplined within their minds. Doing so required constant vigilance and around-the-clock disciplining of one's own mind. In short, Calvin's beliefs regarding predestination set the stage for Calvinist beliefs regarding discipline.

Calvinist discipline manifested itself through the notion of hard work. Sociologist Max Weber went in depth into this phenomena, and labeled it the "protestant work ethic." According to Weber, Protestants--especially Calvinists--exhibited an obsession with discipline and hard work. Some of the belief underpinning the protestant work ethic formed during Calvin's life, but much of it formed immediately following his death. After Calvin's death in 1564, his successors struggled to keep his church together. Calvin's teachings on predestination--namely the fact that most Christians were doomed to hellfire and could not predict their fate, let alone change it--terrified Calvinists and threatened to tear apart the community. Thus, later Calvinist leaders adopted a belief in good works. Weber explains that natural desire to do good works for the glory of God did not send someone to Heaven; it instead was merely a sign that God had already predestined that meritorious individual for salvation. Weber explains: "[t]hus, however useless good

¹¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 103.

¹² Michael H. Lessnoff, *The Spirit of Capitalism and the Protestant Ethic: An Enquiry into the Weber Thesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 6.

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 567.

works might be as a means of attaining salvation...they are indispensable as a sign of election.”¹⁴
In short, good behavior was not the way to salvation, it was the litmus test for salvation.

After Calvinist leaders determined that good works were an important signifier of God’s grace (or lack thereof), they went to great pains to define exactly what they meant by good works. In an action that has had great ramifications in western capitalism, Calvinism partly defined good works as being industrious. As Weber again points out “intense worldly activity is recommended as the most suitable means...it and it alone dispenses religious doubts and gives the certainty of grace.”¹⁵ In short, there is no greater way of ascertaining one’s afterlife than by seeing how hard they work. Calvinism preached the notion that working hard led to success. It did so by equating hard work with God’s salvation.

Idolatry and excess are two last important concepts which tie into Protestant discipline. Calvin was completely opposed to all forms of idolatry. He took an incredibly thorough and literal interpretation of the Bible, and thus arrived at the conclusion that idolatry in all its many forms was a cardinal sin. Calvin was so thoroughly against it that he refused to accept the eucharistic elements as actually containing any divine matter.¹⁶ To do so would be to essentially worship objects, as the bread and wine are objects that many Catholics view as divine. Again, he viewed them as being just a symbol that invites the spirit of Christ. He also forbade the traditional honor that Catholics held for the Virgin Mary, as he felt it bordered on idolatry and “distracted” from the worship of God.¹⁷ As Weber explains, Calvin also opposed excess, like stained glass and music during church, as they were emotional elements which “of no use

¹⁴ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 115.

¹⁵ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 112.

¹⁶ MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 241.

¹⁷ MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 241.

toward salvation and promote sentimental illusions and idolatrous superstitions.”¹⁸ To picture a traditional Calvinist church, imagine the church from *Footloose*, except with no music at all and no stained glass windows. In short, the Calvinist lifestyle was incredibly spartan and disciplined.

In summary, Calvinism preached that disciplining one’s mind was a necessity to avoid sin. To think about forbidden topics or to attempt to pry into God’s mind were horrible sins. Equally important was the performance of hard work. Hard work in a society was a sign that it was a godly community to whom God had given the gift of eternal life. The elimination of the frivolous and extravagant were also necessities. Thus, to Calvin and his successors, life was a constant battle to remain disciplined. Discipline of the mind helped keep one from sin. Discipline of behavior, in the form of constant hard work, was a sign of God’s grace. Leading a disciplined life free of excess made life simpler, avoided idolatry and kept one from sin.

Section II: Calvin’s Successors

John Calvin believed that humans could never figure out their fate in the afterlife. He also said that any attempt to uncover that fate was a horrid sin that humans should avoid at all cost by constantly disciplining their minds. Some seventy years later, the Puritans of New England, who were at least nominally Calvinists, believed that they were God’s chosen people and a covenant existed between themselves and God. At first glance, the disparity between the two beliefs is jarring. However, the belief in a “general election” of a large population centered in a geographic area--such as Geneva or New England--was common to Calvin and the Puritans. The Puritans did not believe that this covenant actually ensured that they were bound for Heaven. Rather, they

¹⁸ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 105.

simply believed that God favored their community just as he had favored Israel, without actually granting all of them his grace. It was not until theologians such as William Perkins, William Ames, John Preston, and Richard Sibbes altered Calvin's original message and transplanted it to New England that the familiar belief that hard work and acceptance of Christ led to heaven actually emerged.

Perkins (1558–1602) introduced the concept that grace was “a tiny seed planted in the soul” which, with the proper nourishment, could grow into fully-fledged salvation.¹⁹ Importantly, Perkins' belief at least hinted at the possibility that all or most people could get to heaven, provided they worked hard at cultivating their faith. Ames (1576-1633), perhaps Perkins' most prominent follower, was incredibly similar to his mentor theologically, though he especially stressed the covenant theology that later New England Protestants focused on so heavily.²⁰

Preston, (1587–1628) and his friend Richard Sibbes (1577–1635) expounded further on the covenant belief, and made the conditions of the covenant very clear. Preston explained that “God hath made a Couenant with you, and you are in Couenant with him.”²¹ Meanwhile, Sibbes explained that “God, for his part, undertakes to convey all that concerns our happiness, upon our receiving of them, by believing on him. Every one in particular that recites these articles from a spirit of faith makes good this condition.”²² Preston points out that God made a covenant with everyone (“it is the ground of all you hope for, it is that that *euery man* is built vpon” italics mine), while Sibbes points out that as long as one believes wholeheartedly in God and his

¹⁹ Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 58.

²⁰ Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 58.

²¹ John Preston, *The New Covenant, or The Saints Portion: A Treatise Unfolding the All-Sufficiency of God, Man's Uprightness, and the Covenant of Grace* (London: Royal Exchange, 1630), 351, as quoted in Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 60.

²² Richard Sibbes, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes, Volume 1*, edited by Thomas Smith (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1868), accessed April 5, 2016, <http://digitalpuritan.net/richard-sibbes/> as quoted in Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 61.

benevolence, salvation is assured. Preston included more specific requirements, including moral uprightness, but the concept is the same: not only can one be sure of their fate, but that it was actually relatively easy to ascertain.

Preston also claimed that “the way to grow in any grace is the exercise of that grace.”²³ Meaning, of course, that living faith was better than having faith. Sibbes continued that “it is not so much the having of grace, as grace in exercise, that preserves the soul.”²⁴ These final two thoughts actually hint at a return to the Catholic belief in performing good works. However, Preston and Sibbes definitely put more of an emphasis on living an overall moral and upright life than merely donating money to charities or the Church itself, as was the Catholic tradition. Finally, Protestants who were wary of any message that promised salvation for all could take comfort in the words of theologian Peter Bulkley, who clarified that “the Lord doth not absolutely promise life unto any” rather “he prescribes a way of life for us to walk in, that so wee may obtaine the salvation which he hath promised.”²⁵ Again, Bulkley focuses on living a good life, not just merely possessing grace itself.

To put the lengthy sermonizing of these thinkers in more succinct terms: God promised that if his followers lived according to his conditions, they could get into Heaven. Among those conditions were living a life free from sin, and working hard. Because the Protestants in New England valued hard work as “that which can be considered good and just,” they viewed it as a

²³ John Preston, *The Saints Daily Exercise: A Treatise Concerning the Whole Duty of Prayer*, (London, 1630), 35, as quoted in Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 88.

²⁴ Sibbes, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes, Volume 1*, 199, as quoted in Miller, *Errand*, 88.

²⁵ Peter Bulkley, *The Gospel-Covenant, or the Covenant of Grace Opened*, (London, 1651), 313, as quoted in Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 88.

moral act.²⁶ Because moral action was the key to the covenant, hard work slowly but surely gained an association with salvation, just as faith did.

Historians are uncertain exactly when the Protestants of New England went from a close Calvinist reading of the Bible to fully accepting the covenant theology that created a connection between hard work and salvation, but there are at least very good indicators that the transition happened around the First Great Awakening (1730-1755). How a society views death is one of the best indicators of their views on salvation. For the Calvinist societies back in Europe as well as the earliest Puritan communities in New England, death was at the center of society and at once occupied both a venerated and feared position in the minds of the community.

As Stannard explains in *The Puritan Way of Death*, the early Puritans were crippled by death-anxiety. Because life held no certain signs of one's fate in the afterlife, and Calvin specifically stated that most people were bound for Hell, Puritans feared death. In fact, even those who believed they might actually receive grace did not greet the news as joyfully as did their descendants. The reason was simple: even if one could actually get into Heaven, there was absolutely no guarantee--or even a way of determining--that one's family or loved ones would join them. Additionally, Puritans were not keen on the prospect of watching all of their former neighbors, friends, and acquaintances languish in Hell for all of eternity. One Puritan explained why when he said: "I can compare this sight and the workings of my heart rising from thence, to be as if I had in the heat of summer looked down into the filth of a dungeon, where by a clear light and piercing eye I discerned millions of crawling living things in the midst of that sink and liquid corruption."²⁷ Anxious views like the above quotation remained the norm for decades.

²⁶ Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 89.

²⁷ Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin, D. D., Volume 2*, edited by John C. Miller, (Edinburgh: James Nichols, 1861), Ivi, quoted in David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 42.

Death became an ever-present hallmark of Puritan culture in New England, to the point where teaching a child to read inevitably included lessons on the universal reach of death. A popular alphabet rhyme included such verses as “T - Time cuts down all / Both great and small” , “X - Xerxes the great did die / And so must you and I” , “Y - Youth forward slips / Death soonest nips.”²⁸ Death was ever present in early Puritan culture in New England, and the anxiety it produced in that culture was a side-effect of their inability to determine their fate in the afterlife.

Though it may seem a stark contrast from the anxiety-riddled writings of many Puritans, other Puritan leaders wrote about how they eagerly looked forward to death. Stannard’s words explain this concept of duality perfectly: “Puritans were gripped individually and collectively by an intense and unremitting fear of death, while *simultaneously* clinging to the traditional Christian rhetoric of viewing death as a release and relief for the earth-bound soul.”²⁹ He offers up the example of Increase Mather (1639-1723), father of Cotton Mather, the minister who helped lead the Salem Witch Trials. The elder Mather preached a sermon in 1715 explaining that he was so excited to die, he wished that he would die whilst standing at the pulpit preaching. That image contrasts sharply with his Cotton’s account of his father’s last days, which include clear expressions of fear, brokenness, feebleness, uncertainty, doubt, and despair.³⁰

The example of Increase Mather shows that as of 1723, the Puritans still heavily viewed death as a terrifying experience which led to an uncertain afterlife. This notion is heavily reinforced by the death imagery present in Puritan graveyards. The traditional gravemarker on New England graves from 1630 to about 1730--give or take a few years--was the death’s-head.³¹ It was emblematic of death, and put the focus of the funeral service and the remembrance of the

²⁸ *The New England Primer*, as quoted in Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 65.

²⁹ Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 79.

³⁰ Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 79.

³¹ Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 157.

dead purely on the fact that they were dead. It gave no mention or allusion to salvation or hellfire. The only thing that the Puritans could be certain of was that their relative had died: their fate in the afterlife was a complete mystery. As the writings of the covenant theologians gained favor, the funerary imagery changed to reflect a more certain and positive view of death and the afterlife. During the middle of the eighteenth century, the death's-head lost favor to the cherub headstone, which was plainly emblematic of heaven and angels.³² In short, the writings about death and funerary imagery of Puritan leaders are windows into the Puritan view of salvation. When the Puritans still held on to the purer form of Calvinist thought, they experienced death-anxiety and an obsession with death. When the Puritans came to gradually accept the writings of Calvin's successors who emphasized the covenant, their funerary imagery changed to a more hopeful vision of the fate of the dead.

Section III: The First Great Awakening

In the wake of the radical changes to New England's religious discourse in the early 1700s, a highly emotional and transformative religious movement sprung up in Massachusetts and soon spread throughout the American colonies. This movement, the First Great Awakening, changed American religious identity in many ways. In his classic work on Puritanism in New England, *Errand into the Wilderness*, scholar Perry Miller calls the Awakening "a transformation, a blaze that consumed the theological universe of the seventeenth century, and left the American wilderness to rake the embers for a new concept of meaning."³³ Miller's description is no hyperbole; this movement took existing religious beliefs, transformed them, and made them accessible on a personal level to the common American citizen. In turn, the thinkers

³² Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 157.

³³ Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 154.

in and around the Awakening helped push Puritanical beliefs closer to the modern American Dream.

One of the most important of these thinkers was Benjamin Franklin, who stripped Puritanical beliefs of their inherent religiosity, and focused more heavily on their ancillary beliefs, such as hard work and individual agency. By doing so, he acted as a shining example of early American culture, and helped to create the new American identity. He also acted as inspiration to Horace Mann--who will be discussed later--one of the founders of the American public education system. That system, in turn, is how the gospel of hard work became a cultural staple among all educated Americans.

One of the most important aspects of the First Great Awakening was that it served to transform American religious identity. This movement ended Puritan hegemony in New England, and by so doing helped to create room for individualism to flourish and become one of the new dominant American traits. The actual process that led to this change involved an influx of new religious thinkers and new populations who overwhelmed the already crumbling structure of Puritanical hegemony. Earlier in New England history, the Puritan power structure merely exiled dissident religious thinkers, like Anne Hutchinson in 1637. However, as the influx of dissidents increased the Puritans could not keep up and the environment became ripe for a religious revolution.

By the 1730s and 1740s, the Puritan way of life, which stressed the community within the church, ran counter to the new, individualistic ways of thinking brought by European theologians. Individualism became a dominant trait in American religion as the Puritans failed to maintain the homogeneous nature of American religious life. New thinkers and religious sects came to New England, spread new ideas, and preached a much more personal and living faith

than did the Puritans. Among these new sects were the Baptists, who gave Americans the living, breathing, emotional faith that Puritanism never could.³⁴ Because Puritanism was partially based off of the notion that the community of the church was the central social institution, the multiplicity of sects in America presented a massive problem. If there was more than one church, then there was no longer just one community, and thus no true way of organizing society. Individualism helped fill the gap in the organizational structure by allowing an individual to choose their own community around which to orient their lives. Eventually, the concept of religious liberty replaced the concept of religious homogeneity, and left America with a multitude of religious sects and a populace heavily concerned over individual agency.

These new thinkers also awakened a movement in America now known as evangelicalism. Evangelical beliefs had much in common with Presbyterianism and Puritanism, but existed in the colonies as a separate and transformed entity. It focused much more on the effects of the Holy Spirit, and its ability to show individual congregants the love of God on a personal basis.³⁵ Historian David Bebbington identified evangelicalism as being a belief system in which the active “expression of the gospel in effort,” was a prominent trait.³⁶ As later sections will show, having a “working” faith was important not only to evangelical leaders during the First Great Awakening, but also to later American thinkers like Benjamin Franklin and Horace Mann. These men took much of their inspiration and morality from the Puritans and the later evangelicals. In turn, they helped to spread a more secular--or at least nonsectarian--version of that message of action and industriousness to the American public.

³⁴ Robert D. Rossel, “The Great Awakening: An Historical Analysis,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 75, No. 6 (May 1970), 918.

³⁵ Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xii .

³⁶ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History From the 1730s to the 1980s*, (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 1989), 3, as quoted in Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, xiv.

The First Great Awakening was far from a monolithic movement with a singular goal. Rather, it is merely the name given to a religious trend--not an organized movement--that focused on changing the religious makeup of America. Some Awakeners, like Jonathan Edwards, sought to change America's religion to align more closely with his Puritan forebears. He typified what journalist Jack Hitt calls the valuecrats: those "who believe that a certain moral framework is a necessary predicate to all good behavior."³⁷ Others, like Samuel Hemphill, seized the emotional renewal of religion to preach his non-dogmatic gospel of good works. By valuing moral action above all else, he helped lay the cornerstone for the values of the meritocrats, who are those who believe that "the best individuals are self-made and high-achieving."³⁸ Exploring both sides of the Great Awakening sheds light on how the values of the early Puritans were carried down and transformed through the middle and end of the eighteenth century. Understanding that transformation is truly the gateway to understanding how the American Dream formed during the nineteenth century.

Edwards sought a return to strict morality based on the fear of eternal damnation. His beliefs are best explained in his sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. He delivered this sermon on July 8th, 1741 in Enfield, Connecticut. First and foremost, Edwards contends that the only thing that saves anyone from hellfire is God. God could, at any time, decide that someone deserved Heaven or deserved Hell. In Edwards' own words: "there is nothing that keeps wicked Men at any one Moment, out of Hell, but the meer pleasure of God."³⁹ In this way, Edwards was similar to the Calvinist thinkers who denied the plausibility of the covenant theology of Preston

³⁷ Jack Hitt, "The Way We Live Now: 12-31-00; The Great Divide," *The New York Times*, December 31, 2000, accessed April 5, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/31/magazine/the-way-we-live-now-12-31-00-the-great-divide.html>

³⁸ Hitt, "The Way We Live Now."

³⁹ Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," accessed April 5, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=etas>, 5.

and Ames, and believed that no one could ascertain their fate in the afterlife until the moment they died. Edwards also believed that a moral background was the key to acting morally. God's grace, of course, was one of the keys to that moral background. This meant that hard work and moral action could not be the key to salvation, because hard work--moral as it may be--was itself a byproduct of God's gift of grace. Therefore in Edwards' view, God's grace and nothing else was the key to salvation.

Hemphill, on the other hand, fought against the very structures and dogma of the organized Presbyterian Church. Though he was later charged with plagiarizing many of his sermons, the ideas contained within them were representative of a strain within the Awakening and were nevertheless very influential to many people, including Benjamin Franklin. One of Hemphill's contemporaries described him as "a vile heretic, a preacher of morality rather than dogma."⁴⁰ That focus was precisely what made Hemphill popular with Franklin and a heretic in the eyes of the Presbyterian elite. According to contemporary sources, Hemphill was also incredibly popular with the common man of Philadelphia, much to the dismay of church leaders.⁴¹ Such popularity with common man, to the dismay of established leaders, is the very factor linking Hemphill and Edwards. Both swept the common man away from the contemporary church dogma, albeit for very different reasons.

Not much of Hemphill's writing remains extant, but Franklin's defense of the former's theology (Hemphill went on trial for heresy in 1735), still exists. In his "Dialogue Between Two Presbyterians" he relays the fictional conversation between a Mr. T, representing the interests of the Presbyterian church, and a Mr. S, who supports Hemphill and represented Franklin's own

⁴⁰ Reverend Patrick Vance, as quoted in Merton A. Christensen, "Franklin on the Hemphill Trial: Deism Versus Presbyterian Orthodoxy," in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 10 No. 3, (July, 1953), 426.

⁴¹ Christensen, "Franklin on the Hemphill Trial," 427.

voice in the debate. Mr. S defends Hemphill's focus on morality and moral acts by saying "Morality or Virtue is the End, Faith only a Means to obtain that End: And if the End be obtained, it is no matter by what Mean." In fact he went so far as to say that "from such Faith alone Salvation may be expected, appears to me to be neither a Christian Doctrine nor a reasonable one."⁴² Essentially, Franklin countered the Presbyterian's claim that Hemphill's focus on moral action was heresy by saying that their focus on faith alone was un-Christian. Hemphill and Franklin's defense of him are key links in the chain leading from the Puritans of the seventeenth century to the development of the American Dream in the nineteenth century. Hemphill represents a key movement toward the acceptance of moral action as the key to salvation, while Franklin represents the Americanizing of that belief.

Benjamin Franklin is one of the most prominent Americans in history. To Americans he represents one of the most important of the Founding Fathers, and a prolific Renaissance man. He was also a writer who wrote extensively on moral issues. In order to improve his own life, he took the moral teachings of certain religious leaders, such as Hemphill and his forebears, and merely took the religious element out of them. As he was a deist, making God happy was far from the first thing on Franklin's mind. Instead of acting morally to please God and save one's soul, Franklin advised people to act morally for the sake of mankind. That of course begs the question: what did Franklin consider moral behavior? Over the course of his writing, he focuses on between four and thirteen virtues. The four he came up with in 1726 in order to straighten out his own life were frugality, sincerity, industry, and charity. These virtues clearly echo the earlier Calvinist belief about living simply, and the Puritan belief in working hard. Later on, he refined

⁴² Benjamin Franklin, "Dialogue Between Two Presbyterians," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 10, 1735, accessed April 5, 2016, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=2&page=27a>

the system to include eight more virtues. The most important of this second list for present purposes are resolution and industry. Franklin described resolution as “perform[ing] what you ought.” He described the industrious person as one who is “always employed in something useful” while not doing unimportant or unnecessary things.⁴³ After being reminded of his own pride by a friend, he added a thirteenth virtue: humility. Importantly, he described humility as imitating Jesus, showing once again his willingness to take religious concepts, secularize them, and make them applicable to anyone.⁴⁴

Franklin’s virtues did not form in a vacuum. His virtues came from the very Puritanism he disavowed through his defense of Hemphill. He was raised by strict New England Puritans in the early 1700s, and carried some of those values into adulthood. He rejected the overtly Christian shell in which those values were packaged, but weaved them into his own life nonetheless. For example, in one of his letters, Franklin mentions a work by Cotton Mather called *An Essay Upon the Good*, where Mather says that “a workless faith is a worthless faith” meaning that faith without moral action is useless.⁴⁵ Franklin clearly translated that message into his own virtues of resolution and industry. Though Franklin failed at eliminating vice from his life, he found that the very act of living a better life made him happier. Thus, he concluded “pitch upon that course of life which is most excellent, and custom will make it the most delightful”⁴⁶ In short, acting virtuously will lead to being virtuous in both mind and body. Through his works, Franklin took Puritan beliefs and pushed them one step closer to becoming the American Dream.

⁴³ Benjamin Franklin, *Franklin: The Autobiography and Other Writings on Politics, Economics, and Virtue*, edited by Alan Houston, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 69, quoted in Alan Houston, *Benjamin Franklin & the Politics of Improvement*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 35.

⁴⁴ Houston, *Benjamin Franklin & the Politics of Improvement*, 35.

⁴⁵ Cotton Mather, *Bonifacius: An Essay upon the Good, 1710*, edited by David Levin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), as quoted in Houston, *Benjamin Franklin & the Politics of Improvement*, 38.

⁴⁶ Ben Franklin to Josiah Franklin, May 1738, as quoted in Houston, *Benjamin Franklin & the Politics of Improvement*, 40.

Section IV A: Reading Primers as Pro-Protestant, Anti-Catholic Messengers

The key to understanding how Puritan values spread to the American public is a firm understanding of the United States educational system. The history of education in America stretches back to the earliest English settlements in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As an examination of colonial reading primers shows, to be educated in colonial America was to be indoctrinated in Protestant values. Importantly, education went beyond being pro-Protestant; it was vehemently anti-Catholic. Because the culture in the English colonies was strongly anti-Catholic, colonial schoolmasters instructed their students to be anti-Catholic as well. Showing the pro-Protestant and anti-Catholic messages in this education shows how the aforementioned traits of hard work and individual agency became cultural staples in early America. It also shows how the education system stopped dissenting messages from interfering with Protestant indoctrination.

An examination of the foremost reading primers in early America shows how the simple act of learning to read served the secondary purpose of teaching Protestant values. The *New England Primer* was the first of these texts, and remained prominent until the *Blue-Back Speller* of Noah Webster gained acclaim in the late 1700s. After Webster, the foremost reading primer was the *Eclectic Reader* of William Holmes McGuffey, first published in the 1830s. All of these primers taught more than literacy. The secondary goal was to teach Protestant values and as such act as a reflection of the heavily Protestant American culture which produced them. As previously mentioned, the Puritans of New England were obsessed with sin and death. So obsessed, in fact, that their children's alphabet rhymes included messages about the inevitability of death and the evils of sin. Just as an American child today may learn that "A stands for Aardvark," Puritan children learned about the letter A through the following rhyme: "In Adam's

fall, we sinned all.” They also learned the letter X by the rhyme: “Xerxes did die and so must I.”⁴⁷ Those rhymes are contained in the 1777 edition of the *New England Primer*, though David Stannard recounted an earlier version of these rhymes in *The Puritan Way of Death*, showing that these ideals remained a constant focus in New England over the centuries.⁴⁸

Also important to keep in mind is that Horace Mann, who helped create America’s public education system, most likely learned to read from the very primers being discussed here, such as the *New England Primer*. Thus, to view Horace Mann’s morals and educational views is to view the mind created by these primers. Horace Mann’s educational system, much like the primers used in his schools, focused on two goals. The primary goal was education. The secondary goal was the instillment of non-sectarian, American values. As later sections will show, this involved sending out anti-Catholic, pro-Protestant messages, and hero-worshipping the Puritans and Benjamin Franklin.

In terms of anti-Catholic messages, the *Primer* had at least one major example. The 1770 and 1843 editions included a reading lesson about the burning of John Rogers, though many other editions may have also included the lesson. John Rogers happened to be a noted Bible-translator who became the first Protestant burned during the reign of “Bloody” Mary I of England in 1554. The lesson included a letter Rogers wrote to his children before his death, which included the following line: “Abhor that arrant whore of Rome, And all her blasphemies, And drink not of her cursed cup; Obey not her decrees.”⁴⁹ This message was in a book meant to teach children not only literacy, but morals. Thus, generations of children in New England grew up with pro-Protestant messages and very clear anti-Catholic messages.

⁴⁷ *New England Primer, 1777 Edition*, accessed April 5, 2016, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/nep/1777/index.htm>

⁴⁸ Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 65.

⁴⁹ “The Burning of Mr. John Rodgers,” *New England Primer, 1777 Edition*, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/nep/nep22.htm>

Both the *Blue-Back Speller* of Webster and the *Eclectic Reader* of McGuffey included similar pro-Protestant messages, and together they dominated American literacy education from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. Webster subtitled a section of his book “Lessons of easy words, to teach children to read, and to know their duty.” That section included the all too familiar Protestant admonitions against sin and the saving grace of God as the key to avoid hellfire.⁵⁰ Similarly, the McGuffey readers from 1837 included lessons with titles such as “Religion the only basis of society” and “Omnipresence of God” and included a page dedicated to the Lord’s Prayer.⁵¹ Historian Timothy L. Smith points out that McGuffey readers were “testaments to the Protestant virtues which a half a century of experience had elevated into the culture-religion of the new nation.”⁵² Clearly, the lessons of the Puritans did not die as American culture formed and the new American nation rose to prominence. Its children were still being taught in schools the same values that their forefathers were taught in church.

Section IV B: Horace Mann, the Puritans, and Benjamin Franklin

Horace Mann was one of the fathers of the American public education system. He worked heavily to reform the Massachusetts educational system, which was already far ahead of many other states, due to the 1647 law, called the Old Deluder Act, which made education free and universal in the state. He continued the work of his Puritan forebears during his lifetime (1796 - 1859), not only by improving the education system, but ensuring that their morals and

⁵⁰ Noah Webster, *American Spelling Book*, accessed April 5, 2016, <http://www.english.illinois.edu/-people-faculty/debaron/402/402files/noahspell.html>

⁵¹ William Holmes McGuffey, *McGuffey’s Eclectic Fourth Reader* (Cincinnati: Truman & Smith, 1837), accessed April 5, 2016, <http://www.mcguffeyreaders.com/pics/4thread7.jpg>

⁵² Timothy L. Smith, “Protestant Schooling and American Nationality, 1800-1850,” *Journal of American History* 53 (March 1967), 695.

religious values made their way into that education system. He also made sure that schools included Puritan history into their curriculum, and he personally adhered to Benjamin Franklin's view that moral behavior led to moral beliefs.

Horace Mann's motivation for creating a better system of education was morally based. To him, education was the key to grasping the gifts of God, maintaining good health, gaining morality, and ensuring the health of the nation for years to come. Not surprisingly, his Puritan forefathers had similar, if not exactly the same, motivations for creating the Massachusetts educational system through two laws in 1642 and 1647. They opened the Old Deluder Law of 1647 by advocating for education as the key to stopping Satan. Satan, according to them, tried first and foremost to keep people ignorant, and therefore the universal education of God's people was the best way of fending him off. Equally important, they also said that one of Satan's methods of maintaining ignorance was to keep the scriptures in "an unknown tongue."⁵³ Keeping the scriptures in one language, Latin, which was foreign to many Christians, was the practice of the Catholic Church. Thus this line seems to be a direct attack against Catholicism, likening them to Satan. Though Mann did not directly attack the Catholic Church as the Puritans did, he most certainly shared their concern that ignorance was a tool and goal of Satan and that education was the solution. Mann earnestly expressed this sentiment during the 1859 Baccalaureate Address at Antioch College, just months before he died. He compared his fight for education to a crusade which he wanted to continue, saying "I would enlist for another fifty-years' campaign, and fight it out for the glory of God and the welfare of man...I would...assault the very citadel of Satan and carry it by storm."⁵⁴ Thus, in perhaps his most honest and heartfelt moments, just before death,

⁵³ *The Old Deluder Act (1647)*, accessed April 5, 2016, <http://www.constitution.org/primarysources/deluder.html>

⁵⁴ Horace Mann, "Antioch College Baccalaureate Address of 1859," *Horace Mann on the Crisis in Education*, edited by Louis Filler. (Yellow Springs: The Antioch Press, 1965), 224.

Mann explained that his mission was a moral one, and involved the saving of America's children's souls.

Time and time again, Mann expressed clearly the purpose for which he labored, and by so doing showed his connections to the Puritans and earlier thinkers like Benjamin Franklin. First, in multiple speeches and reports, he expressed the values of hard work and the evils of sloth. In his *Lectures on Education*, Mann explained the need for better funding for schools: "they need a better schoolhouse to save their children from ill health, or a better teacher to rescue them from immorality and ignorance; or even a slate or a shilling's worth of paper to save them from idleness"⁵⁵ Here, Mann obviously expresses the values of education, but he also echoes Puritan morals by equating the detrimental effects of idleness to ignorance, immorality, and ill health. Essentially, not working hard was tantamount to sickness and sin. He also encouraged teachers by saying that their work was truly God's work: "If we ever feel the earthly motives contending with the heavenly in our bosoms,--selfishness against duty, sloth against enduring and ennobling toil, a vicious contentment against aspiring after higher and attainable good,--let us not suffer earth-born to vanquish the immortal."⁵⁶ Mann understood that teaching was a hard job, and encouraged them to keep working by saying that the hard work they did was a duty to God. He also equated hard work, duty, and lofty aspirations to God, and laziness, selfishness, and contempt to human sin. That again shows the value he placed on the Puritan value of hard work.

In addition to echoing the morals of the Puritans, he also expressed familiarity with and reverence for the less-overtly-religious messages of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin believed that the constant performance of moral acts would eventually lead a person to want to perform moral

⁵⁵ Horace Mann, "Our Education: Its Dignity and its Degradation," *Horace Mann on the Crisis in Education*, 20.

⁵⁶ Horace Mann, "Books and Libraries," *Horace Mann on the Crisis in Education*, 44.

acts.⁵⁷ Eventually, a person would never commit immoral acts because they had no desire to do them. Mann believed that reading good books worked in a similar fashion to performing those moral acts. “Let good books be read, and the taste for reading bad ones will slough off from the minds of the young, like gangrened flesh from a healing wound.”⁵⁸ Essentially, if schools and homes only have good books, then students will never want to read bad books.

Among others, Mann considered “good books” any book that covered America’s pre-Revolutionary history. He compared those books to the direct word of God, and other books to the “mock-shows and counterfeits and hearsays” of false prophets.⁵⁹ Thus, familiarizing oneself with Puritan history was one way of gaining a moral compass and staving off the Satanic vice of ignorance. Again, Mann shows his reverence for not only Puritan values, but Puritan history. He also wanted to ensure that all American children grew up hearing the glorious of America’s Puritan forebears, which undoubtedly would indoctrinate them with the same Puritan values which Mann most likely learned by reading *The New England Primer* or Webster’s *Blue-Back Reader* as a child.

Aside from the fact that his views on books were a perfect mirror to Franklin’s overall view on morality, some of Mann’s other beliefs also lined up with Franklin’s. He echoed Franklin’s views on morality in 1840 by saying that teachers were responsible for instilling good behavior in their students. The importance of good behavior was that “good or bad manners mature into good or bad morals” meaning that good or bad behavioral tendencies lead to good or bad moral tendencies.⁶⁰ Franklin said essentially the same exact thing. The connection between Mann and Franklin was far from coincidental. Mann revered Franklin, read his works heavily,

⁵⁷ Alan Houston, *Benjamin Franklin & the Politics of Improvement*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 40

⁵⁸ Horace Mann, “Books and Libraries,” *Horace Mann on the Crisis in Education*, 45.

⁵⁹ Horace Mann, “Books and Libraries,” *Horace Mann on the Crisis in Education*, 60

⁶⁰ Horace Mann, “The Indispensable Teacher,” *Horace Mann on the Crisis in Education*, 76.

and said that the fruits of Franklin's mind shed light on the entire universal as bright and longstanding as the Sun's own light.⁶¹ It truly is important that Mann, the father of the American public education system, adhered to Franklin's view of morality. Franklin focused on the behaviors, or works, of people. That focus on what people did became ingrained in the American education system along with the Puritan focuses on industry and individual agency.

Section IV C: Non-Sectarian as Anti-Catholic

Though Mann was staunchly anti-sectarian, the way in which his system and later systems based on it actually implemented a non-sectarian education heavily favored Protestantism as a whole. Thus, the following section focuses heavily on the pro-Protestant message of American education following Mann's example, as well as the consequences that that system had on American Catholics.

In an address to Antioch College in 1857, he spent much of his time expounding upon the dangers of a sectarian education. While he spoke to a college audience and his comments were in the context of higher education, there is no reason to believe he thought a sectarian education for children would be any better than it would be for adults. Among the dangers of a sectarian education, according to Mann, were that sectarian schools were "training the children and youth under their care to be incapable of impartial thought." In such an environment, "the glorious majesty of truth would linger and mourn."⁶² Essentially, sectarian education was no education at all. Students educated in that system would be unable to think impartially and would be robbed of the truth.

⁶¹ Horace Mann, "Books and Libraries," *Horace Mann on the Crisis in Education*, 54

⁶² Horace Mann, "Antioch College Baccalaureate Address of 1857," *Horace Mann on the Crisis in Education*, 219.

Given that staunch indictment against pushing sectarian views into education, some might find it shocking that Mann's education system was so thoroughly infused with Protestant values. However, Mann and many other political and educational leaders of the nineteenth century saw no such dissonance. Protestantism was not, in their minds, a sect, but rather the default lens of viewing Christianity. Thus, to them, they were not indoctrinating children with Protestantism, merely Christian truth.

The specific way Mann handled this dilemma to his detractors was crucial. Some accused him of making the education system too Protestant, while others derided him for not being Christian enough. To them he said simply:

"our system earnestly inculcates all Christian morals; it founds its morals on the basis of religion; it welcomes the religion of the Bible; and, in receiving the Bible, it allows it to do what it is allowed to do in no other system,— to speak for itself. But here it stops, not because it claims to have compassed all truth; but because it disclaims to act as an umpire between hostile religious opinions."

Mann claimed he was not providing a sectarian education because he did not teach sectarian values, but rather directly from the Bible. Because the Bible was the immutable truth directly from God, it did not descend into sectarian squabbles but instead transcended them.

In the view of Catholic Americans, however, Mann and his colleagues failed to be non-sectarian. In their eyes, the public school system discriminated against Catholic and favored Protestants. One main source of their criticism was the very fountainhead from which Mann claimed his non-sectarian education flowed: the Bible. Many public school systems included scripture readings as part of the curriculum, just as Mann explained. The problem came in the fact that almost every single district used the King James Bible as their Bible of choice.

Educational leaders believed that the King James version was a “common” Bible, while the Catholics believed that it was a Protestant Bible, and preferred the Douay translation.⁶³ The issue became so contested that in 1844, riots broke out in Philadelphia. The Bible Riots of 1844 broke out after Bishop Kenrick suggested changes to the curriculum that would allow students to choose which Bible they wanted to read from, and allowed Catholic students to opt out of Protestant-specific religious exercises. Nativist organizations in the city, which looked down on Catholics, spun this reform idea into anti-Catholic propaganda. Many nativists in Philadelphia came to believe that Catholics wanted to ban the Bible in school.⁶⁴ When the school board eventually allowed Catholics to opt out of Bible readings, nativists had enough and pounced. After three days, 13 people were dead and 50 were wounded.⁶⁵

Philadelphia was far from an isolated incident. Anti-Catholic sentiment in America remained strong for decades, and was still strong enough in the 1960s that it affected voter opinion on John F. Kennedy, America’s first and so-far only Catholic president.. Besides the Bible, Catholics were clearly cognizant of the Protestant nature of school materials such as the McGuffey readers, which, as historian Timothy Walch explains “mirrored the values of the native-born middle class in America but made little effort to appeal to the sensibilities of [Catholic] Irish and German immigrants.”⁶⁶ The Protestant nature of the U.S. public education system was so obvious and so detrimental in the minds of Catholics that they formed parish and parochial schools. The vast majority of private schools in the United States which have any religious affiliation are Catholic, with 12% of all American students educated in such institutions

⁶³ Timothy Walch, *Parish School: American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 28.

⁶⁴ Walch, *Parish School*, 45.

⁶⁵ Walch, *Parish School*, 47.

⁶⁶ Walch, *Parish School*, 27.

during the height of the parochial school system in the mid-twentieth century.⁶⁷ This fact is the result of an educational system so thoroughly infused with Protestant values that non-Protestants went to great extremes, risking financial stability, their own health, and the safety of their congregations, to exit that school system and form their own schools.

Of course, though the overtly Protestant values, like those contained in the King James Bible and the McGuffey readers, were largely absent in the Catholic parochial schools, it is likely that some of the less overt Protestant values were actually wiped out. For example, there is nothing inherently Protestant about working hard, and doing good things for the sake of mankind. In fact, the Catholic Church has, at many times, taught a Gospel of Works to its congregants. Therefore, teaching students to work hard and do good things might not have seemed to Catholic officials to be something foreign and Protestant, but rather quite a good thing to instill in children. Thus, it is quite possible that even in the most Catholic areas of the country, where most students attended private schools, they were not free from the values of Horace Mann and his Puritan forebears.

Section IV D: Making Americans

Besides inoculating students with Protestant values, American schools served another secondary purpose beyond the primary purpose of educating students in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Public schools were essentially American factories. Not in the sense that they were factories located in America, but rather that they were factories which created Americans. During the time that the American public education system formed, immigration from Europe skyrocketed, with millions of immigrants arriving on American shores by the end of the

⁶⁷ Walch, *Parish School*, 1.

nineteenth century.⁶⁸ Importantly, the majority of these immigrants came from Germany, Poland, Italy, and Ireland; heavily Catholic countries. The native-born American population, which was heavily Protestant, viewed the immigrants not only as religiously different, but as fundamentally different due to their un-American nature. One goal of the public school system was to make these immigrants good Protestant Americans. As historian Carl Kaestle noted, “It was not their exclusive purpose, but it dominated the thinking of schoolmen. Because poverty, social deviance and religious differences were seen in highly charged moral terms, the schoolmen [viewed homogenization] as a sort of alchemy, in which some undesirable members of society would be transformed into useful members.”

The education system’s means of creating Americans in schools were twofold: literacy, and the national identity. Literacy created an informed populace which could defend America against the evils of foreigners. The national focus on literacy was of course centered on the eclectic readers of William McGuffey, which were obvious sources of Protestant values. National identity was a concept that involved taking all students from various backgrounds, socializing them together, indoctrinating them with American values, and forging “a common national identity” in which “immigrant children would be encouraged to abandon their ties to their parents, homeland, and religion and embrace the American republic and Protestant religion.”⁶⁹

Making Americans in schools truly created the American Dream as it is known today. These children of immigrants knew that the American Dream was possible because the fact that they were in school meant that they were better off than their parents. They were already on the fast track to success, and their public school education told them that it was because of the hard

⁶⁸ Walch, *Parish School*, 23.

⁶⁹ Walch, *Parish School*, 26.

work of their parents. Protestant values helped explain the world around them. They had a better life than their parents because their parents did the good, Christian thing: they sent their kids to public school, they worked hard, they went to church, and they held their destiny in their own hands. In turn, they knew that they had to work hard and raise their kids as good Americans. To do so surely meant that they would succeed.

Section V A: Bruce Barton and the Re-Forging of Jesus Christ

The American Dream's roots on the American continent started with the transformed Calvinist ideals of the Puritans. Men like Benjamin Franklin and Horace Mann took hold of those ideals and disseminated them to the American public. As generations of American children grew up being taught the American Dream in school's based on Mann's model, the Dream itself overshadowed many of the Christian values which inspired it. The cultural dominance of the American Dream is perhaps best evidenced by businessman Bruce Barton's 1925 book, *The Man Nobody Knows*. In it, Barton re-writes the Gospel stories, re-imagining Jesus Christ as the most successful businessman in history. He also set up Christ as the ideal American man; macho, intelligent, confident, a ladies' man, and a rugged outdoorsman. By so doing, Barton not only fused Americanism and Protestantism even further, but he also added capitalism to the mix. Partially because of Barton's contributions, the three systems are virtually inseparable in modern American society.

The Man Nobody Knows was reflective of the culture which produced it but also served as prescriptive literature to teach businessmen and average Americans alike how to succeed. Barton's book sold hundreds of thousands of copies in the decades following its publication and remained a bestseller for years. In it, Barton presented Jesus as a macho, strategic, ad-man

entrepreneur who ‘sold’ his religion and views to millions of people. Though his goal was to make the Christ story accessible to American businessmen, what Barton succeeded in doing is muddling Christianity, American culture, and capitalism so thoroughly that the three are sometimes indistinguishable to this day.

By retelling the story of Jesus Christ to make it accessible to Americans, Barton made Jesus into the prototypical American male. Church leaders advised their congregants to be humble and follow the teachings of Christ. Similarly, Barton advised Americans, especially American men, to be alpha male self-made outdoorsmen who took life by the reins and forged their own destiny, just like Jesus. Barton’s exact descriptions of Jesus match up eerily well with the European immigrants to whom Barton’s message reached as they became American citizens.

Early on in the book, Barton describes Jesus in the following manner: “a poor boy, growing up in a peasant family, working in a carpenter shop; gradually feeling His powers expanding, beginning to have an influence over His neighbors, recruiting a few followers, suffering disappointments, reverses and finally death. Yet building so solidly and well that death was only the beginning of His influence.”⁷⁰ There are a few key points to unpack here. First, Jesus came from absolutely nothing. In this way, Jesus proved a key analog to the European immigrants who came to America seeking their fortune. Both Jesus and these immigrants started with nothing. Second, Jesus worked hard. Carpentry, was an incredibly laborious occupation, which left Jesus with “nerves the strength of steel.”⁷¹ Essentially, Jesus was a rugged macho man who worked hard in the same way that Americans worked hard in factories, fueling America’s rise as an industrial superpower. Finally, Jesus used his hard work and his own natural talents to work his way up to the power and influence he experienced in his later years. He was, in essence,

⁷⁰ Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1962), 19.

⁷¹ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*, 43.

the American Dream success story. He worked hard and he succeeded because he never quit and believed in himself. In Barton's own words "Nothing is impossible if only your willpower is strong enough."⁷²

Aside from being successful, Barton's Jesus was a consummate ladies' man. Much of that success came down to Jesus' physical strength, stemming from his work as a carpenter. Barton explains that "[m]en followed Him, and the leaders of men have very often been physically strong. But women worshiped Him."⁷³ Barton does not bring this fact up to insinuate in any way that Jesus maintained sexual or romantic relations with women like Mary Magdalene, but to show what their reverence for him signified about him. Barton clearly lays it out when he states that "women are *not* drawn by weakness."⁷⁴ Jesus must have been strong, because no woman would respect or revere a weakling. Barton also explains that Americans respect Jesus in part because of his strength and rugged nature, saying "as much as any nation ever, Americans understand and respect this kind of man."⁷⁵ In short, Jesus was no meek lamb of God, Jesus was a powerful shepherd who built up his flock through the power of his will and the might of his limbs. Women wanted him, and men wanted to be him.

Barton worked capitalism into the formula through three key concepts. First, Jesus' rise to power mirrors the rise to power experienced by many business leaders. Essentially, Jesus was not just an inspiration to the lowly European immigrant--in fact they were perhaps a secondary or even tertiary audience--he was an inspiration to America's business elite. He worked hard, rose up from nothing, and soared to great heights. Second, Barton argued for a relatively hands-off approach as being the ideal economic setup, saying "[f]ree men, acting independently of

⁷² Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*, 39.

⁷³ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* 40.

⁷⁴ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* 41.

⁷⁵ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* 43.

government, pool their skills and money to aid other men in other countries who have been enslaved...the principle that he who serves best accomplishes most spreads to every area.”⁷⁶ Meaning that people working out problems without government intervention not only allowed mankind to flourish, but it also spread the ideal that working for the good of others was the key to success. That idea was Barton’s response to Jesus’s “splendid...but utterly impractical” notion from Mark 10:44 that those in the highest positions are those who are the best servants.⁷⁷ He made the idea more palatable to businessmen by moving their actions closer to humanitarians and further away from servants, in much the same way that he attempted to make the entire story of Jesus more relatable to his audience.

Third, Barton credits Jesus with pioneering the very key to success championed by America’s captains of industry. Barton and his fellow businessmen called it the “Spirit of Modern Business.” Barton says that Jesus knew of this concept, having invented it almost two millennia before American businessmen coined the term. This concept is the belief that “worthiness is related to any advancement or gain.”⁷⁸ Worthiness referred to someone’s merits as an individual, and in turn merit often came down to how hard a person worked and how talented they were. A person’s sayings or beliefs were largely irrelevant.

By tying success to worth or merit, Barton not only established himself and his fellow businessmen as meritocrats, but he also insinuated that Jesus was one too. Meritocrats believe that “the best individuals are self-made and high-achieving.”⁷⁹ Recall that Benjamin Franklin and Horace Mann also exhibited beliefs and behaviors consistent with the meritocrat category.

⁷⁶ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* 103.

⁷⁷ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* 103.

⁷⁸ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* 104.

⁷⁹ Hitt, “The Way We Live Now.”

Elements of Puritan theology which exalted hard work as the keys to a good, moral life helped to foster this belief system in the minds of Franklin and Mann. Through Barton, the meritocrat philosophy lived on and continued into the twentieth century. Also recall that the meritocrat philosophy is key to the American Dream, as both place immense value on a person's actions instead of their words or beliefs. To drive this point home, Barton quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson, saying "What you *are* thunders so loud I can't hear what you say."⁸⁰ Men like Franklin, Mann, and Barton created the legend of the great American meritocracy, where anyone could succeed if they just worked hard enough.

Section V B: American Exceptionalism and Winning as the Dominant Cultural Trait

The American Dream is one aspect of a larger belief system that praises the unique and incredible traits that set the United States of America apart from the rest of the world. This belief system is called American Exceptionalism. To its adherents, the American Dream is proof positive that America is the greatest country on Earth, because America allows anyone to succeed. American Exceptionalism is a hotly debated topic, with many scholars, such as famed British journalist Godfrey Hodgson, calling it nothing more than a myth. However, what is lost on those within the debate is that the actual truth value of American Exceptionalism lies not in its existence, but in the belief that it exists. Exploring American Exceptionalism sheds even more light on the manifestations of the American Dream within American culture, while simultaneously giving the socio-cultural backdrop for the public mass shootings, to be discussed later.

⁸⁰ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*, 25.

One key aspect of American Exceptionalism focuses on the lack of class divisions and the resulting equal opportunity Americans have to achieve success. Whereas Europeans had to overcome rigid class distinctions--remnants of a feudal system which never took hold in America--Americans faced no such struggle. As Hodgson puts it "this school of thought claimed...no American could be trapped in class disadvantage for more than one generation except by his or her own fault."⁸¹ Of course, that entire belief is predicated on the conscious and willful dismissal from the American Dream of anyone who did not have white skin. The existence of slavery throws a massive wrench into the belief that America was truly the universal land of opportunity.⁸² However, it must again be stated that regardless of its inherent truth value, the very belief in America as a universal land of opportunity has and continues to affect American culture. In a society that believes it is exceptionally opportunistic, a person's failure can only be seen as that person's failure to work hard. America gave that person all the opportunities it could, and due to their laziness or incompetence, they failed anyway.

Adherents of American Exceptionalism put forward another claim about America's unique nature on the world stage. Politically, socially, and economically, Europe centered on tradition, or the means, instead of the ends. America, meanwhile, centered on innovation and success. Political leaders upheld the culture of the nation by stressing that all activities be performed correctly. Marriage patterns, religious beliefs, and a person's place in the economic hierarchy were all based on the traditional way in which society worked. As sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset points out, creating and maintaining traditions and social norms allowed the privileged (ennobled) classes to keep hegemony. Lipset explains; "[t]o emphasize correct

⁸¹ Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 12.

⁸² Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*, 12.

behavior, manners, and so forth is to reward the characteristics which those born to privilege are most likely to have.”⁸³ In short, if life is a game, playing it well is better than winning. Proper conduct--the means--supersedes victory--the ends.

The United States, on the other hand, focused on the ends, not the means. The ends of the American Dream are success, winning, fame, and power. Rather than quibble over the exact means used to achieve those ends, as this school of thought accuses Europe of doing, Americans focus on succeeding above all else. This focus caused Robert K. Merton, one of the founders of American sociology, to say that “American culture appears to approximate the polar type in which great emphasis upon certain success-goals occurs without equivalent emphasis upon institutional means.”⁸⁴ This is not to say, however, that Merton observed the United States abandoning its obsession with hard work. What Merton means is that (monetary) success is held up as the goal, and hard work--however legitimate or illegitimate that work needs to be--is the means. Because there is no exact prescription over exactly how that work has to occur, he views it as less focal in the grand scheme of the American Dream. That point becomes more clear when he continues, “Americans are bombarded on every side by precepts which affirm the right, or, often, the duty of retaining the goal even in the face of repeated frustration.”⁸⁵ Here, Merton shows that Americans are simply told to persevere and keep going, with no regard to the cost.

The writings of Hodgson, Lipset, and Merton are clear: many Americans believe that their land is a universal land of opportunity in which every person can succeed. Regardless of whether universal success is actually achievable or realistic, the mere fact that belief in such a system is dominant in America is striking. Its effects are widespread, leaving some individuals to

⁸³ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 48.

⁸⁴ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 190.

⁸⁵ Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 191.

move to America, such as the European immigrants of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Other people live their lives according to that maxim. Politicians venerate those ‘self-made’ Americans who rose from nothing to create success for themselves, while deriding unsuccessful Americans. To many politicians and cultural leaders, unsuccessful Americans and lazy Americans are one and the same. Even today, hard work has a clear association with success, while laziness has an association with poverty. One reason behind that fact is that many Americans view America as the great equalizer which gives everyone a simple opportunity to succeed. However, as the next section will show, other Americans often times face failure with tragic results.

Section VI A: Public Mass Shooters as Failures

No action occurs within a vacuum. Public mass shootings, whether they happen at a school, a mall, or a movie theater, happen within a socio-cultural backdrop. When these shootings happen in the United States of America, the American Dream is a distinct and dominant part of that backdrop, and as a result exerts influence on the motives and actions of the shooters. This is not to say that these shootings happen exclusively because of the American Dream. Public mass shootings in America cannot escape the cultural context in which they occur, a large part of which is the American Dream. The American Dream is one of a multitude of factors and pressures that create the phenomena of public mass shootings. Other factors include mental illness, access to firearms, interpersonal conflict, and trauma. Importantly, the American Dream shapes many of these other factors. The Dream’s focus on individual agency goes hand in hand with the widespread availability of firearms. The forms which mental illness and delusions take often times depend on their cultural context. No one factor explains every

shooting or every aspect of even a single shooting. The American Dream connects to public mass shootings because many of these shootings are perpetrated by individuals obsessed with demonstrating their power to America in order to gain fame and success.

The following section will draw heavily from the work of two prominent scholars. The first is Dr. Peter Langman. A psychologist by profession, Dr. Langman is one of America's foremost experts on public mass shootings. Given his background, much of his work focuses on the mental health aspect of public mass shooters. His second and most recent book, *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators* forms the basis of much of this section due to its comprehensive study of 48 school shooters. The second scholar featured heavily in this section is Dr. Adam Lankford. Lankford is currently a criminal justice professor at The University of Alabama, and is a criminologist by profession. His book *The Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers* forms the basis of much of this section, in addition to other works by Lankford, such as *Fame-Seeking Rampage Shooters: Initial Findings and Empirical Predictions*.

Anyone shocked by or who disagrees with the hypothesis that the American Dream connects to public mass shootings might adhere to the prevalent belief in American society that bullying is one of, if not the definitive, cause behind school shootings--a major category of public mass shootings. That belief is a massive misconception. Langman, in his analysis of 48 school shooters, found that 40% of shooters experienced bullying.⁸⁶ Compare that figure to the anywhere from 27.8-70% of the general student population who faces bullying, according to various studies.⁸⁷ Also compare that to the figure of 54%, which is the percentage of Langman's

⁸⁶ Peter Langman, *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 163.

⁸⁷ Langman, *School Shooters*, 197.

cases wherein the shooter was the bully, not the bullying victim.⁸⁸ Though, it must be noted that in some of these cases, the shooter was simultaneously a bully and bullying victim. In any case, less than half of Langman's cases of school shootings involve a bullying victim. If bullying is not the cause of these shootings, then is there any causal factor that is common to all or most of these shooters? In fact there is: failure. Educational failure in particular is perhaps the single most common factor among school shooters, having affected 92% of Langman's shooters.⁸⁹ Educational failure includes failing classes, failing to graduate on time, repeating grades, or having extensive disciplinary issues which inhibit student learning. What these figures show is that, contrary to popular belief, most of these shooters were not victims of bullying. Rather, they were victims of failure. In a culture predicated on success, these shooters' failure ended in tragedy.

The aforementioned lack of vengeance on school bullies is evidence that bullying is not the main causal factor at play in school shootings. Likewise, the high number of school personnel targeted in these shootings is evidence that failure plays a major part in American school shootings. Besides children as a general category, the single largest group of victims in school shootings is school personnel.⁹⁰ In some cases, the shooter actually made their violent intentions towards these figures known. They told people that their failures were the fault of school personnel. One such shooter, Robert Flores, told one professor "you better watch your back if you're going to flunk me."⁹¹ He also threatened two other professors who had failed or considered failing him. He only killed three people in his rampage, before killing himself. It should not come as a surprise that those three professors were his only victims. Shooters like

⁸⁸ Langman, *School Shooters*, 197.

⁸⁹ Langman, *School Shooters*, 163.

⁹⁰ Langman, *School Shooters*, 198.

⁹¹ Langman, *School Shooters*, 92.

Flores failed, saw the sources of their failure as the villains in their lives, and killed them to even the score. In fact, some shooters went so far as to say that their actions were heroic, because by removing these villains from the world, they made it a better place.⁹²

One last note on the topic of education is that out of those shooters who murdered their family members, 83% of them killed family members who were related in some way to the educational field.⁹³ Some were professors, some were principals, and some were teachers. Many of these shooters were educational failures who had to live in the shadow of not only successful siblings, but also parents who worked in the education field. It is worth mentioning that out of Langman's 48 shooters, only one killed both of their parents. That shooter, Kip Kinkel, had two schoolteachers as parents, a successful sister, and did not succeed educationally, having repeated the first grade and struggling with dyslexia.⁹⁴ Kinkel was also one of the 60% of shooters who was not a known victim of bullying. He also did not experience abuse or violence at the hands of his parents. This fact is telling, given that out of Langman's traumatized shooters, many of whom had incredibly abusive parents, none killed both parents. Therefore it is quite clear that educational failure had a bigger impact on many shooters than did bullying or trauma.

Further evidence that failure, and not bullying or other trending factors held up by the media, are to blame for these shootings can be found in the victims who were related to other failed areas in the shooters' lives. For example, the third largest demographic killed in the shootings Langman studied were women. Besides education, many shooters failed to succeed romantically. These shooters kill women because successfully dating or having sex with women was part of their version of success. Because women had stood in the way of that goal, and

⁹² Langman, *School Shooters*, 92.

⁹³ Langman, *School Shooters*, 167.

⁹⁴ Langman, *School Shooters*, 41.

therefore ensured failure for the shooters, the shooter killed them.

One of the most perfect examples of a shooter who killed women because of their own personal failure to succeed romantically is Elliot Rodger. His 2014 rampage on and around the UC Santa Barbara campus focused on the women who were symbolic of those who had destroyed his life, and the men who had succeeded where he had failed. In his words, not only had women “treated me like the scum of the earth,” but they had “showed me no mercy.”⁹⁵ In return, he promised them no mercy. He continued and actually explained his full motive, saying:

“I always mused to myself that I would rather die than suffer such an existence, and I knew that if it came to that, I would exact my revenge upon the world in the most catastrophic way possible. At least then, I could die knowing that I fought back against the injustice that has been dealt to me.”

Women destroyed his life, and they needed to pay for that crime. By killing them, Rodger viewed himself as a hero who would even the scales and do justice, much in the way that Flores did.

Interestingly, Elliot Rodger also used his crime as a way to succeed. As a physically small man, Rodger harbored intense feelings of inadequacy towards himself. He pointed out that women did not like “perfect gentlemen” like himself, but rather the “alpha male” kind of man. He describes these men as those who “appear to have the most power and status.”⁹⁶ Power: something the physically weak Rodger never experienced in his life, until his rampage. By killing those women, he became in death what he could never be in life: a successful alpha male. As someone who aspired to be an alpha male, Rodger hated people who were already alpha

⁹⁵ Elliot Rodger, *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger*, accessed April 5, 2016, 7; 101 <http://abclocal.go.com/three/kabc/kabc/My-Twisted-World.pdf>

⁹⁶ Rodger, *My Twisted World*, 28.

males, because they succeeded where he failed. He said of current alpha males: “they deserved to die horrible, painful deaths just for the crime of enjoying a better life than me.”⁹⁷ Rodger’s shooting showcases how many romantically unsuccessful shooters target the source of their failure (women) to attack their own feelings of failure, attack successful people (alpha males) out of jealousy, and use the shooting to attain the success they lacked in life.

Langman’s shooters grew up as failures in a culture that told them that they could and should succeed. The mere fact that they failed must have been hard enough for them to bear. However, what exacerbated the pain and anger many of these shooters felt was the fact that people within their immediate family--people who had access to the same resources and who were taught the same morals and lessons--succeeded marvelously while they themselves failed miserably. Langman notes that cases of “sibling rivalry,” in which a shooter had a successful sibling, were incredibly common amongst psychotic shooters. He points out the example of Dylan Klebold, one of the Columbine shooters, who resented his older brother, who was popular and athletically successful. He also mentions Steven Kazmierczak, who committed his shooting at the same university at which his sister successfully completed her master’s degree.⁹⁸ Also difficult for many of these shooters is the fact that in most cases where there was a family history of mental illness, only the shooters themselves, not their successful siblings, were affected.⁹⁹ Many shooters failed, but also sulked in the shadows of their more successful family members. Their failures kept them firmly in the shadows of their successful siblings, and made it hard to bear the weight of their inadequacies.

⁹⁷ Rodger, *My Twisted World*, 107.

⁹⁸ Langman, *School Shooters*, 173

⁹⁹ Langman, *School Shooters*, 173.

Section VI B: Fame-Seeking Shooters

Lankford not only backs up Langman's figures, but also expands upon them by showing that many public mass shooters--not just school shooters--exhibit similar tendencies of failure and obsession with success. Lankford's main point is that American culture is obsessed with celebrity and fame, which eludes the shooters. To fulfill these ends, shooters who often times lack the legitimate means to obtain them--physical strength, social aptitude, a sound mind, financial resources--stoop to illegitimate means. As Lankford puts it "in cultures where being a celebrity is viewed as the ultimate achievement, it should not be surprising that some individuals would lie, cheat, and steal to become famous."¹⁰⁰ Of course, those most obsessed with fame and least concerned with the means to achieve that success turn to incredibly violent and often times deadly methods of achieving celebrity.

Lankford specifically proves that many public mass shooters commit their crimes in order to escape failure and achieve success. By analyzing the actual words, both written and verbal, of the shooters, Lankford determined that between 1966 and 2015 there were 24 public mass shooters in America whose motives were firmly fame-seeking.¹⁰¹ Due to his incredibly strict criteria, as well as his study's high standard of evidence, the fact that Lankford even found 24 shooters is incredibly important. This is true especially considering most scholars focus on the obvious examples--Columbine and Virginia Tech--and leave it at that. Bear in mind that Lankford only included examples of shooters who killed at least two people and explicitly stated that their motives were fame-seeking. If he had included shooters who most likely committed

¹⁰⁰ Adam Lankford, "Fame-Seeking Rampage Shooters: Initial Findings and Empirical Predictions," in press *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2016, 2.

¹⁰¹ Lankford, "Fame-Seeking Rampage Shooters," 4.

their crimes to achieve celebrity, but they did not explicitly state that as their goal, the number of shooters in his study surely would have skyrocketed.

Lankford's study shows that as early as 1966, many shooters committed their crimes not because of bullying, but because, in the words of college shooter Robert Benjamin Smith, "I wanted to get known, just wanted to get myself a name."¹⁰² Additionally, he found evidence to support the previous finding that fame-seeking shooters kill and wound more than those shooters who are not fame-seeking. This fact makes sense, given that a higher body count usually leads to more intense news coverage, and more fame.¹⁰³ Connected to this very idea, Langman recounts how in 1997, Bethel High School shooter Evan Ramsey and his friends discussed shooting their principal, saying "[d]on't kill yourself...you got to live the fame and the fortune."¹⁰⁴ To them, suicide was not the ideal outcome after a school shooting, because if they were dead, how would they enjoy the fame that killing their principal--a high profile target--would surely bring them? Of course, many school shooters are perfectly accepting of suicide, choosing to become martyrs and celebrities in death, as evidenced by Seung Heui Cho, who said plainly in his manifesto: "I die, like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and defenseless people."¹⁰⁵ Not only did Cho seek fame, but he viewed death as merely the beginning of his legacy.

If public mass shooters commit their crimes to gain fame, and fame is their version of success, meaning shootings are their way of achieving the American Dream, and the American Dream has existed in some form for centuries, then an obvious problem presents itself: why did public mass shootings start so recently? The fact is, these shootings have existed in America for an incredibly long time. Many of these early shootings, however, had clear motives. The very

¹⁰² Lankford, "Fame-Seeking Rampage Shooters," 4.

¹⁰³ Lankford, "Fame-Seeking Rampage Shooters," 5.

¹⁰⁴ Lankford, "Fame-Seeking Rampage Shooters," 65.

¹⁰⁵ Lankford, "Fame-Seeking Rampage Shooters," 5.

first school shooting in America, for example, occurred during Pontiac's War, and was the result of enemy combatants entering a school and massacring most inside.¹⁰⁶ Others involved similar, clear motives, none of which were outwardly fame-seeking, while others had no clear motives at all. Whatever the case, fame-seeking shootings do not actually start until at least the late 1800s, with fame-seeking mass shootings only truly starting in the 1960s. The reasons are actually quite simple. First, it is unclear whether or not fame-seeking was actually a cultural goal in America prior to the late twentieth century. Certainly individuals might have wanted fame, but it is not clear whether the entire culture viewed fame as a major goal like it does today. Second, even if fame was a cultural goal, there is no evidence to support an assertion that mass public shootings would or could garner the attention of the nation as it does today. Prior to instant media communication across the country, just how famous could one person get for killing a few people in their hometown? The answer is unclear.

What allows fame-seeking shooters to know that their actions will result in fame is the fact that it has happened before. From manifestos and other writings, scholars know that many shooters hero-worship the shooters that came before them. They look to those shooters and mass murderers as examples of how killing a lot of people can lead to success. For example, Sandy Hook shooter Adam Lanza was completely obsessed with school shooters, and compiled a massive database wherein he ranked school shooters from best to worst.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, if a potential shooter has no idea that a public mass shooting can give them fame and success, why do it in the first place? That is one reason why the rise of public mass shootings begins after the 1960s. When Charles Whitman climbed the tower University of Texas and killed 16 people,

¹⁰⁶ David Dixon, *Never Come to Peace Again: Pontiac's Uprising and the Fate of the British Empire in North America*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 223.

¹⁰⁷ Lankford, "Fame-Seeking Rampage Shooters," 5.

injuring 32, he set a dangerous precedent.¹⁰⁸ He proved that a shooter could kill people, spread panic, and capture attention. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, arguably the most famous school shooters in American--if not world--history, made it even more clear to Americans that fame was only a bullet away. Within the first ten years following their shooting at Columbine High School, no less than five other fame-seeking shooters carried out their own attacks. One such shooter, Alvaro Castillo, was quoted as saying “[t]oday is the big day for Operation Columbine. It is time that the world be reminded of Columbine!”¹⁰⁹ In short, fame-seeking shooters arose once fame-seeking Americans realized that shooting people in public could quench their thirst for fame.

Based on the research of Lankford and Langman, it appears that the American Dream helps to influence two types of public mass shooters: fame-seeking shooters and failure shooters. The two are often very closely linked because many shooters who are failures seek fame as a means to overcome their failures and finally succeed. However, the overlap is not complete, because many shooters who were failures did not explicitly state fame-seeking as a motive; rather, many cited revenge as a motive. Also important to note is the fact that these shooters often times label themselves as failures, using American’s culture’s benchmarks for success and failure. American culture expects young men to successfully pursue young women, for example. Because Elliot Rodger did not successfully pursue women, both he and American culture viewed him as a failure. As a result, he sought to take revenge on those who were more successful than him, and by so doing, become the alpha male he had always envied. Thus it is obvious that the way in which individual shooters view themselves is inexorable from the way American culture as a whole views them.

¹⁰⁸ Langman, *School Shooters*, 103.

¹⁰⁹ Lankford, “Fame-Seeking Rampage Shooters,” 5.

Section VII: Limitations of the Current Study

America is such a diverse nation that to say there is one American Dream can be problematic. However, the point of this project is to point out that prominent mainstream religious figures, educational reformers, and even the United States government have sanctioned a particular incarnation of the American Dream, and that dream focuses on hard work, individual agency, and success. There are definitely other dreams in America; African American dreams, Asian American dreams, female American dreams, and so on. If time was not a constraint, there would exist entire sections on these dreams and the way that mainstream American culture reacted to the existence of those dreams. As it stands, coverage of race and gender are limitations of this project. Though, it is worth noting that many women and non-white Americans adhere to the same basic tenets of the American Dream, regardless or in spite of their race or gender. Additionally, public mass shooters include women and non-whites in their ranks, contrary to popular belief. Therefore, the American Dream and its dark side do make some room for people who are not white men, though more research is needed on their involvement in this and other dreams.

Section VIII: Conclusion

The American Dream has its roots in the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther and John Calvin, while never being able to imagine, let alone concur with, the American Dream, laid the groundwork for that dream by solidifying individual agency and hard work as Protestant values. Those values, in turn, came to American shores because both the exiles aboard the *Mayflower* in 1620 as well as John Winthrop's band of zealots in 1630 were firm Protestants. Calvin's spiritual

successors—men like William Ames, William Perkins, John Preston, and Richard Sibbes—transformed Calvin’s message, and thus warped the minds of the New England Puritans away from the strict beliefs of their forebears. These Puritans came to believe that any person could gain salvation, if only they worked hard, avoided sin, and had a strong faith in God.

By the mid-eighteenth century, an influx of European intellectuals with differing religious beliefs combined with stagnant social conditions in the American colonies. Out of this turmoil erupted the First Great Awakening, which transformed America’s religious landscape by allowing for individualism and religious liberty. Thinkers like Benjamin Franklin preached the almost secularized gospel of personal industry, and by so doing inspired future generations of American movers and shakers.

Horace Mann and his reformed public education system helped spread Protestant values under the guise of American values. Hard work, Protestant interpretations of Christianity, and education became staples of American culture. Millions of children, many of them new to America, were indoctrinated by Mann’s system, and came to believe that hard work was indeed the key to success. To these children and their immigrant parents, success meant building up intergenerational wealth in America, and working hard was the key to that dream. As children grew up with those beliefs, they also grew up hearing vehemently anti-Catholic messages. They learned that Protestantism—under the guise of American non-sectarianism—was the one truth path. Due to Mann’s hero-worship of pre-Revolutionary American history, these children also learned that the Puritans were noble people with a great history that deserved reverence from all Americans.

As World War I ended and America experienced the golden days of the Roaring Twenties, generations of Americans also came to learn something new about their Lord and

Savior, Jesus Christ. According to bestselling author and advertising magnate, Bruce Barton, Jesus was strong, popular with women, an adept businessman, and the perfect American man. It is at this juncture that capitalism, Americanism, and Protestantism became strongly interwoven into the same fabric.

As the twentieth century went on, however, Americans continued to focus on success without paying an equivalent or similar focus on using legitimate means to obtain that success. Hard work was still the primary means for most Americans to achieve success, at least in their own minds. However, many came to view success gained by illegitimate means just as rewarding as success gained by legitimate means. Often times, those illegitimate means were easier to use, or even more appealing. With the construction of a celebrity culture, wherein many sought above all else their own fame, illegitimate means became more prevalent as a tool for success.

Once enough mass shootings became publicized enough to reach the eyes and ears of disillusioned, often times mentally ill, failing, and fame-obsessed Americans, a lightbulb went off in their minds. These people realized that killing people—especially those people who had wronged them in some way—was an efficient and spectacular means of achieving the fame and therefore success that they so dearly craved.

Thus, when taken to its logical end, the American Dream presents a problem. In its simplicity, it ignores the multitude of factors that impact a person's ability to succeed. For example, while it was possible for white Europeans to assimilate into American society and become "good Americans," it was not possible for African Americans to do the same. In its simplicity, the American Dream creates a message that leads politicians and voters alike to view the financially, socially, and occupationally successful as hard working, and the consummate

failures as lazy. Thus, it becomes obvious where the American association of poverty and laziness comes from.

In its simplicity, the American Dream creates another, much more dangerous notion. It creates the notion that society's definition of success is the goal to which all Americans must aim. If American culture happens to view fame, of any kind, as success, then becoming famous by any means is the cultural goal of the American public. Combined with the American media's obsession with reporting the macabre and grisly murders of innocent people in public mass shootings, the American Dream creates a culture which helps to create public mass shooters.

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