

**Losing the ‘American Dream’**

**America should still be a place where if you work hard, you can achieve your dreams**

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The legislation unveiled last month by the bipartisan group of senators known as the "gang of eight" is already a breakthrough after decades of inaction regarding illegal immigration. The bill includes many of the basic elements that will be critical to effective reform, including providing a pathway to citizenship for undocumented individuals, securing our borders and improving the existing federal process. However, it's what's missing from the conversation about a way forward on this issue that says the most about where we've landed as a country.

Nowhere in the 844-page bill or the early analysis following its release is there mention of the "American Dream" – a notion that is at the heart of problem and should be the inspiration for a solution.

I am not an immigrant. But as a first-generation American, I've spent my life existing somewhere between the day-to-day challenges that are too often inherent in the immigrant experience – facing down poverty, racism, linguistic and cultural barriers – and working hard to log the achievements that might one day live up to my parents' ideal of the American Dream. Yet through all the obstacles and the struggles, I always knew I was lucky because my parents were in this country legally – and that we ultimately belonged.

That experience is one reason it has consistently confounded me over the years that so many of our elected leaders – on both sides of the aisle – have failed time and again to stand up for the ideals inscribed on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free…"

One factor may be that the last time this country had a serious discussion about immigration reform, its greatest proponent was a true believer who championed the idea of the American Dream as a matter of course. In his own words, Ronald Reagan "always thought of America as a place in the divine scheme of things that was set aside as a promised land" where "the price of admission was very simple ... Any place in the world and any person from those places; any person with the courage, with the desire to tear up their roots, to strive for freedom, to attempt and dare to live in a strange and foreign place, to travel halfway across the world was welcome here."

In fact, Republicans frequently forget their icon of an idyllic conservative past actually proposed a treaty in his November 1979 speech announcing his candidacy that would have permitted workers throughout North America full freedom of movement across borders. Today, opponents of reform are likely dismiss the term "American Dream" as an emotional ploy while supporters eschew the idea for fear of being criticized for lacking a substantive argument for changing the status quo.

Whatever the reasons, somehow the idea that people come to this country simply because they aspire to make a better life and be part of the land of opportunity has been relegated to the sepia-toned imagery of the past. Yet the tens of millions of immigrants – legal and undocumented – currently following the discussion on Capitol Hill would beg to differ. And the fact is many of the provisions under consideration as part of the gang of eight bill would go a long way toward restoring the promise of the American Dream – even if the legislation never specifically makes that claim.

Ultimately, the reforms currently being debated – with features such as a 13-year wait for benefits, a $500 fine that may prove to be a stretch for families living paycheck to paycheck, and an undue focus on borders and "porous, high-risk zones" like Arizona that encourages a continued perception of undocumented immigrants as "illegals" rather than dreamers – are by no means perfect. But we shouldn't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. And we should take action now to reclaim that storied concept of the American Dream for all.

My parents came to this country to escape war, carrying few belongings but many hopes. They always taught me that being born in America doesn't make me better than my immigrant counterparts, it just makes me more fortunate. Perhaps most importantly, my parents taught me that this is still a country where if you work hard you can achieve your dreams. And that should be true whether you came into this world on American soil, or not.

Let's hope the parents of our Congressional leaders taught them the same.