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The Rule of Law and the American Dream

The United States of America is the epitome of freedom and opportunity – a land in which all citizens, regardless of their background, can attain prosperity based on equal rights. This ideological reality known as the American Dream was founded 250 years ago when the Declaration of Independence was signed. It established the rule of law – the concept that no individual controls or is exempt from the law. Moreover, the rule of law paved the way for the American Dream by making the United States a nation of the people and a meritocracy in which any citizen can succeed. Therefore, the Declaration of Independence both formed the rule of law while also enabling the American Dream, concepts that remain vital to our country's identity today.

In signing the Declaration of Independence, a group of otherwise ordinary citizens became America's founding fathers when they instituted the rule of law, essentially proposing government in the form of a social contract. This idea suggests that the role of government is to defend the rights of the people. Hence, the people are not subject to the government. Instead, the government is subservient to the people since it must work in their interests. Otherwise, it breaks

this “contract” and is eventually replaced or overthrown. A government does not wield power in a nation such as this. On the contrary, it is the law which commands society. The law objectively punishes and protects all citizens without bias. The law is to be applied equally and fairly. No person or group controls the law because the law controls the people. The law rules how America is governed and, by extension, its citizens.

Hence, the Declaration of Independence created the rule of law, distinguishing the country as a nation of freedom from a world of dictatorships and autocratic regimes that thrived upon social inequality. At the time, the rule of law was an unprecedented advancement in rights that would champion this nation’s rise as a global power. While other governments consolidated power by senselessly punishing their citizens, America thrived under social equality and industrial success.

The United States also became a nation of immigrants as a result. Countless refugees realized their poor situation while acknowledging the opportunities for success of people in America. With faith in the rule of law, they voyaged overseas towards an equal society where they knew their rights could not be infringed. America became the “land of the free” because people fled from unfair prosecution and persecution in their homeland. However, they did not trust the rule of law alone – they imagined something more. They believed in the American Dream.

The American Dream is the idea that any person, no matter their identity, can find liberty, rights, equality, opportunity, and prosperity within the United States. Nonetheless, this definition has greatly varied over the nation’s history. Early settlers would likely argue that the American Dream was the promise of land and freedom. In the 19th century, the American Dream was often embodied by the California gold rush. It acted as means for Americans and immigrants alike to

escape socioeconomic bindings by acquiring immense wealth. 20th century Americans generally defined the American Dream as the pursuit of a simple suburban life, a nuclear family, and a “white picket fence” throughout the Cold War. As for the 21st century, Americans continue to debate as to what the American Dream has become.

While the American Dream remains changing and sometimes unattainable, people continue to pursue it. Regardless, there must be an underlying mechanism that enables all citizens to continually believe in the sustainability of ideals derived from the American Dream. Specifically, the rule of law upholds the widespread desire for liberty and equal rights by fostering a society in which the people are fairly protected by unwavering rules instead of the whims of the corrupt and those in power. Additionally, Americans can believe in the promise of prosperity and opportunity because they are given an equal chance in society without regard to their origin, culture, ethnicity, or religion. The American Dream is the painting that defines the United States as a country, but it is the rule of law that serves as the easel, continuously upholding the American Dream by making it attainable.

The Declaration of Independence, signed 250 years ago, simultaneously created the rule of law and the American Dream, ideas crucial to the triumph of the United States throughout history. Every year, Americans celebrate Law Day to reflect on the American judicial system, but it is also a chance to look to the future, for the rule of law is still imperfect. It is due to this imperfection that members of America’s legal system remain crucial to safeguarding the rule of law and its proper application. Without attorneys, judges, juries, or the rule of law itself, the United States would lose its identity, as America is defined by its fairness in governance and due process. If the rule of law was reduced to merely an idea, then the strength and legitimacy of the American Dream would diminish as a result.

Thus, the rule of law is imperfect, but it is the system of governance fundamental to America itself and the American Dream. Therefore, it is our duty as American citizens to defend the rule of law. We must maintain the social contract that our forefathers agreed to 250 years ago by voting for politicians that would protect our rights. We must serve our duty as jury members when we are subpoenaed. We must vote in every election. We must speak up and speak out when we witness or perceive injustice. We must protect the weakest members of society who, at times, may not be able to protect themselves. Simply put, we must defend the rule of law as citizens, for in defending the rule of law, we defend the American Dream. We celebrate Law Day since the rule of law cannot defend America alone – it needs “We the People” to uphold it.