

# My American Dream

*Victor Terry*

The idea of The American Dream has always fascinated me. The notion is that if you work hard, do well and pull yourself up by your bootstraps you can achieve greatness in America. As a young Black boy in Mississippi this was almost forced fed to me every day. I was also made aware that for me to achieve The American Dream I would have to work harder than the white kids and my father made sure to point out that I would have to work harder than the light skinned Black kids as well.

Being ready to escape the traps of poverty, that I had seen engulf my family and friends around me, I worked tirelessly in school to make the best grades and in life to avoid unwanted attention. I did not want to have a baby at a young age. I did not want to be gay and bring shame upon my family before I died of AIDS. I did not want to be a high school dropout. I did not want to run into any type of legal problems and go to jail where I was surely going to be raped. And this wanting to escape and never look back drove my actions my entire life.

When I entered college I was so close to The American Dream I could taste it. As a first generation college student I took a massive amount of classes every semester and always invested in the professor's opinion, making it clear that I did not have my own and that I agreed with whatever they said. I took summer classes and joined the Student Government Association to prove my worth. To top it all off I joined an elite Black Greek Letter Fraternity to assert my status. Graduation day was a day of celebration because I felt I had

escaped, and not only did I escape, I escaped without a police record, a baby or AIDS.

My degree was my stamp of approval for The American Dream, and I relished in this approval. It wasn't until one fall afternoon that the Mississippi winds blew a reality check my way. I was driving to my mother's house, which happened to be by the university I attended. During this seemingly routine drive I was pulled over for what seemed like a routine traffic stop. The officer approached my car and asked, "Do you know why I stopped you today?" I replied with a polite no sir. He then told me in a very friendly manner to step out of my car and he would show me why. I complied and he walked me to the back of my car and pointed to my fraternity license plate frame and said it was not in regulation with the state's laws. I assured him that this was an honest mistake that I would fix immediately. He smiled. I smiled and started back for my driver's seat. Then he stopped me and instructed me to put both my hands on the trunk of my car and spread my legs. I was frisked right down the street from the university that I thought liberated me from such actions.

My humiliation did not end after I was frisked. The officer told me that I could let him search my car or he could bring the drug dogs out. Never did he ask to search my car. Ready to have this treatment end I agreed to let him search my car. I had never been more afraid of going to jail than on that day. And at that moment I realized that my college degree did not serve as sufficient enough freedom papers. I realized that I had very limited

control over my body. And most of all I realized that keeping my mouth shut and my head low did not guarantee me survival. Knowing the Queen's English did not guarantee my survival. I realized that I will forever only be an observer of The American Dream because I could never truly achieve it.

In this revelation I found myself. I found pride in my race and in my experiences. I found my voice. I found something to fight for. I woke up from the idea of The American Dream and I found Malcolm X waiting for me, I found radical Amiri Baraka waiting for me, I found Sonia Sanchez waiting for me, I found Assata Shakur waiting for me. I found true liberation waiting for me.