In polls conducted during the past fifteen years, between ninety-six and ninety-eight per cent of all Americans said that they were “very” proud or “quite” proud of their country. When young Americans were asked whether they wanted to do something for their country, eighty-one per cent answered yes. Ninety-two per cent of Americans reported that they believe in God. Eighty-seven per cent said that they took “a great deal” of pride in their work, and although Americans work more hours annually than do people in other industrialized countries, ninety per cent said that they would work harder if it was necessary for the success of their organization. In all these categories, few other nations of comparable size and economic development even come close. By nearly every statistical measure, and by common consent, Americans are the most patriotic people in the world.
Is there a problem here? Samuel P. Huntington, who provides these figures in his new book, “Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity” (Simon & Schuster; $27), believes that there is. The problem is the tiny fraction of Americans in whom national pride, patriotic loyalty, religious faith, and regard for the work ethic might possibly be less than wholehearted. He has identified these people as the heads of transnational corporations, members of the liberal élite, holders of dual citizenship, Mexican-Americans, and what he refers to as “deconstructionists.” He thinks that these groups are responsible for an incipient erosion of national identity, a development that he views with an alarm that, while it is virtually unqualified, is somewhat underexplained. Although the erosion of national identity at the hands of multiculturalists and liberal élites is something that people were fretting and fighting about five or ten years ago, a lot of the conviction leaked out of the argument after the attacks of September 11th. This is partly because the public response to the attacks was spontaneously and unequivocally patriotic, suggesting that the divisions animating the so-called “culture wars” ran less deep than the cultural warriors supposed, and partly because the cultural pluralism that had once seemed threatening became, overnight, an all but official attribute of national identity. Inclusiveness turned out to be a flag around which Americans could rally. It was what most distinguished us from them. The reality, of course, is more complicated than the ideology, but the ideology is what Huntington is worried about, and either his book is a prescient analysis of trends obscure to the rest of us or he has missed the point.

Huntington’s name for ideology is “culture.” The advantage of the term is that it embraces collective beliefs and assumptions that may not be explicit most of the time; the trouble with it is that it is notoriously expansive. Culture, ultimately, is everything that is not nature. American culture includes American appetites and American dress, American work etiquette and American entertainment, American piety and American promiscuity—all the things that Americans recognize, by their absence, as American when they visit other countries. What Huntington wants to talk about is a specific cluster of American beliefs, habits, assumptions, and institutions. He calls this cluster “America’s core culture.” It includes, he says, “the Christian religion, Protestant values and moralism,
a work ethic, the English language, British traditions of law, justice, and the limits of government power, and a legacy of European art, literature, philosophy, and music,” plus “the American Creed with its principles of liberty, equality, individualism, representative government, and private property.” (“Human rights” was on the list in the copies sent to reviewers; it does not appear in the finished book.) This, he maintains, is the culture of the original European settlers; it is the culture to which, until the late twentieth century, every immigrant group assimilated; and it is the culture that is now imperilled.

Huntington’s core values are rather abstract. It would probably take many guesses for most of the Americans who score high in the patriotism surveys to come up with these items as the basis for their sentiments. What Americans like about their country, it seems fair to say, is the quality of life, and if the quality of life can be attributed to “a legacy of European art, literature, philosophy, and music” then Americans, even Americans who would be hard-pressed to name a single European philosopher, are in favor of those things, too.

It could be argued that Americans owe the quality of life they enjoy to America’s core culture, but Huntington does not argue this. He cares about the core culture principally for its unifying effects, its usefulness as a motive for solidarity. He is, in this book, not interested in values per se; he is interested in national security and national power. He thinks that the erosion or diffusion of any cluster of collective ideals, whatever those ideals may be, leads to weakness and vulnerability.

Most readers who are not political scientists know Huntington from his book “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,” which was published in 1996, and which proposed that cultural differences would be the major cause of global tension in the future. The book was translated into thirty-three languages and inspired international conferences; its argument acquired new interest and credibility after the attacks of 2001 and the American response to them. Huntington’s thesis could be taken as an answer to Francis Fukuyama’s idea of “the end of history.” History—that is, conflicts among groups—did not come to an end with the Cold War and the demise of liberalism’s main ideological opponent, Huntington argued. The defeat of Communism did not mean that everyone had become a liberal. A civilization’s belief that its values have become universal, he warned, has been, historically, the sign that it is on the brink of decline. His book therefore appealed both to people in the West who were anxious about the diversification or erosion of Western culture and to people outside the West who wanted to believe that modernization and Westernization are neither necessary nor inevitable.

The optimal course for the West in a world of potential civilizational conflict, Huntington concluded, was not to reach out to non-Western civilizations with the idea that people in those civilizations are really like us. He thinks that they are not really like us, and that it is both immoral to
insist on making other countries conform to Western values (since that must involve trampling on their
own values) and naïve to believe that the West speaks a universal language. If differences among
civilizations are a perpetual source of rivalry and a potential source of wars, then a group of people
whose loyalty to their own culture is attenuated is likely to be worse off relative to other groups. Hence
his anxiety about what he thinks is a trend toward cultural diffusion in the United States.

You might think that if cultural difference is what drives people to war, then the world would be a
safer place if every group’s loyalty to its own culture were more attenuated. If you thought that,
though, you would be a liberal cosmopolitan idealist, and Huntington would have no use for you.
Huntington is a domestic monoculturalist and a global multiculturalist (and an enemy of domestic
multiculturalism and global monoculturalism). “Civilizations are the ultimate human tribes,” as he put
it in “The Clash of Civilizations.” The immutable psychic need people have for a shared belief system
is precisely the premise of his political theory. You can’t fool with immutable psychic needs.

"Who Are We?” is about as blunt a work of identity politics as you are likely to find. It says that
the chief reason—it could even be the only reason—for Americans to embrace their culture
is that it is the culture that happens to be theirs. Americans must love their culture; on the other hand,
they must never become so infatuated that, in their delirium, they seek to embrace the world. “Who
Are We?” would be less puzzling if Huntington had been more explicit about the larger vision of
global civilizational conflict from which it derives. The new book represents a narrowing of that
vision. In “The Clash of Civilizations,” Huntington spoke of “the West” as a transatlantic entity. In
“Who Are We?” he is obsessed exclusively with the United States, and his concerns about
internationalism are focussed entirely on its dangers to us.

The bad guys in Huntington’s scenario can be divided into two groups. One is composed of
intellectuals, people who preach dissent from the values of the “core culture.” As is generally the case
with indictments of this sort, recognizable names are sparse. Among those that do turn up are Bill
Clinton, Al Gore, the political theorist Michael Walzer, and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum. All of
them would be astonished to learn that they are deconstructionists. (It is amazing how thoroughly the
word “deconstruction” has been drained of meaning, and by the very people who accuse
deconstruction of draining words of meaning.) What Huntington is talking about is not deconstruction
but bilingualism, affirmative action, cosmopolitanism (a concept with which Nussbaum is associated),
pluralism (Walzer), and multiculturalism (Clinton and Gore). “Multiculturalism is in its essence anti-
European civilization,” Huntington says. “It is basically an anti-Western ideology.”

He thinks that the deconstructionists had their sunny moment in the late nineteen-eighties and early
nineties, and were beaten back during the culture wars that their views set off. They have not gone
away, though. In the future, he says, “the outcomes of these battles in the deconstructionist war will undoubtedly be substantially affected by the extent to which Americans suffer repeated terrorist attacks on their homeland and their country engages in overseas wars against its enemies.” The more attacks and wars, he suggests, the smaller the deconstructionist threat. This may strike some readers as a high price to pay for keeping Martha Nussbaum in check.

The other group in Huntington’s analysis is composed of what could be called the globalists. These are the new immigrants and the transnational businessmen. The new immigrants are people who, as Huntington describes them, “may assimilate into American society without assimilating the core American culture.” Many maintain dual citizenship (Huntington calls these people “ampersands”); some do not bother to become American citizens at all, since the difference between the benefits available to citizens and those available to aliens has become smaller and smaller (a trend that originated, Huntington notes, among “unelected judges and administrators”). In a society in which multiculturalism is encouraged, the loyalty of these immigrants to the United States and its core culture is fragile. What distinguishes the new immigration from the old is the exponential increase in global mobility. As Huntington acknowledges, it has always been true that not all immigrants to the United States come to stay. A significant proportion come chiefly to earn money, and eventually they return to the countries they were born in. Transportation today is so cheap and available, though, that people can maintain lives in two nations indefinitely.

Mobility is also what distinguishes the new businessmen, the transnationals. These are, in effect, people without national loyalties at all, not even dual ones, since they identify with their corporations, and their corporations have offices, plants, workers, suppliers, and consumers all over the world. It is no longer in Ford’s interest to be thought of as an American company. Ford’s market is global, and it conceives of itself as a global entity. These new businessmen “have little need for national loyalty, view national boundaries as obstacles that thankfully are vanishing, and see national governments as residues from the past whose only useful function now is to facilitate the elite’s global operations,” Huntington says. “The distinction between America and the world is disappearing because of the triumph of America as the only global superpower.” This drives him into the same perverse position he got himself into at the end of his attack on the deconstructionists: it is better to have rivals than to be dominant. It is good to compete, but it is bad to win. If we won, we would lose our national identity. The position, though, is consistent with the argument Huntington made in “The Clash of Civilizations”—the argument that nation-states ought to remain inside their own cultural boxes.

The most inflammatory section of “Who Are We?” is the chapter on Mexican immigration. Huntington reports that in 2000 the foreign-born population of the United States included almost eight million people from Mexico. The next country on the list was China, with 1.4 million. Huntington’s
concern is that Mexican-Americans (and, in Florida, Cuban-Americans) demonstrate less motivation to learn English and assimilate to the Anglo culture than other immigrant groups have historically, and that, thanks to the influence of bilingualism advocates, unelected judges, cosmopolites, and a compliant Congress, it has become less necessary for them to do so. They can remain, for generations, within their own cultural and linguistic enclave, and they are consequently likely to be less loyal to the United States than other hyphenated Americans are. Huntington believes that the United States “could change . . . into a culturally bifurcated Anglo-Hispanic society with two national languages.” He can imagine portions of the American Southwest being ceded back to Mexico.

This part of Huntington’s book was published first as an article in *Foreign Policy*, and it has already provoked responses, many in the letters column of that journal. Michael Elliott, in his column in *Time*, pointed out that in the Latino National Political Survey, conducted from 1989 to 1990, eighty-four per cent of Mexican-Americans expressed “extremely” or “very” strong love for the United States (against ninety-two per cent of Anglos). Ninety-one per cent said that they were “extremely proud” or “very proud” of the United States. As far as reluctance to learn English is concerned, Richard Alba and Victor Nee, in “Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration” (Harvard; $39.95), report that in 1990 more than ninety-five per cent of Mexican-Americans between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four who were born in the United States could speak English well. They conclude that although Hispanic-Americans, particularly those who live close to the border, may continue to speak their original language (usually along with English) a generation longer than other groups have tended to do, “by any standard, linguistic assimilation is widespread.”

Huntington’s account of the nature of Mexican immigration to the United States seems deliberately alarmist. He notes, for example, that since 1975 roughly two-thirds of Mexican immigrants have entered illegally. This is the kind of statistic that is continually cited to suggest a new and dangerous demographic hemorrhaging. But, as Mae Ngai points out, in “Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America” (Princeton; $35), a work a hundred times more nuanced than Huntington’s, the surge in illegal immigration was the predictable consequence of the reform of the immigration laws in 1965. In the name of liberalizing immigration policy, the new law imposed a uniform quota on all countries, regardless of size. Originally, Western Hemisphere countries were exempted from specific quotas, but the act was amended in 1976, and Mexico was assigned the same annual quota (twenty thousand) as, for example, Belgium. This effectively illegalized a large portion of the Mexican immigrant population. “Legal” and “illegal,” as Ngai’s book illustrates, are administrative constructions, always subject to change; they do not tell us anything about the desirability of the persons so constructed. (Ngai’s analysis also suggests that one reason that Asian-Americans are stereotyped by other Americans as products of a culture that places a high value on education is that
the 1965 immigration act gives preference to applicants with professional skills, and, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, for reasons internal to their own countries, many Asian professionals chose to emigrate. Like professionals from any other culture, they naturally made education a priority for their children.)

Finally, some of Huntington’s statistical claims are improperly derived. “Three out of ten Hispanic students drop out of school compared to one in eight blacks and one in fourteen whites,” he says, and he cites other studies to argue that Hispanic-Americans are less educationally assimilated than other groups. Educational attainment is not an index of intellectual capacity, though; it is an economic trade-off. The rate of high-school graduation is in part a function of the local economy. For example, according to the Urban Institute and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Florida has one of the worst high-school graduation rates in the United States. This may be because it has a service economy, in which you do not need a diploma to get reasonably steady work. To argue that Hispanic-Americans are disproportionately less likely to finish school, one would have to compare them not with non-Hispanic Americans nationally but with non-Hispanic Americans in the same region. Huntington provides no such comparisons. He is cheered, however, by Hispanic-Americans’ high rate of conversion to evangelical Protestantism.

This brings us back to the weird emptiness at the heart of Huntington’s analysis, according to which conversion to a fundamentalist faith is counted a good thing just because many other people already share that faith. Huntington never explains, in “Who Are We?,” why Protestantism, private enterprise, and the English language are more desirable features of social life or more conducive to self-realization than, say, Judaism, kibbutzim, and Hebrew. He only fears, as an American, their transformation into something different. But how American is that? Huntington’s understanding of American culture would be less rigid if he paid more attention to the actual value of his core values. One of the virtues of a liberal democracy is that it is designed to accommodate social and cultural change. Democracy is not a dogma; it is an experiment. That is what Lincoln said in the Gettysburg Address—and there is no more hallowed text in the American Creed than that.

Multiculturalism, in the form associated with people like Clinton and Gore, is part of the democratic experiment. It may have a lot of shortcomings as a political theory, but it is absurd to say that it is anti-Western. Its roots, as Charles Taylor and many other writers have shown, are in the classic texts of Western literature and philosophy. And, unless you are a monoculturalist hysteric, the differences that such multiculturalism celebrates are nearly all completely anodyne. One keeps wondering what Huntington, in his chapter on Mexican-Americans, means by “cultural bifurcation.” What is this alien culture that threatens to infect Anglo-Americans? Hispanic-American culture, after all, is a culture derived largely from Spain, which, the last time anyone checked, was in Europe. Here
is what we eventually learn (Huntington is quoting from a book called “The Americano Dream,” by a Texas businessman named Lionel Sosa): Hispanics are different because “they still put family first, still make room in their lives for activities other than business, are more religious and more community oriented.” Pull up the drawbridge!

Insofar as multiculturalism has become, in essence, an official doctrine in public education in the United States, its effects are the opposite of its rhetoric. “Diverse” is what Americans are taught to call themselves as a people, and a whole society cannot think that diversity is good and be all that diverse at the same time. The quickest and most frictionless way to nullify difference is to mainstream it. How culturally unified do Americans need to be, anyway? In an analysis like Huntington’s, a nation’s strength is a function of the strength of other nations. You don’t need microchips if every other country on the planet is still in the Stone Age. Just a little bronze will do. But if the world is becoming more porous, more transnational, more tuned to the same economic, social, and informational frequency—if the globe is more global, which means more Americanized—then the need for national cultural homogeneity is lesser, not greater. The stronger societies will be the more cosmopolitan ones.

Perhaps this sounds like sentimental internationalism. Let’s be cynical, then. The people who determine international relations are the political, business, and opinion élites, not the populace. It is overwhelmingly in the interest of those élites today to adapt to an internationalist environment, and they exert a virtually monopolistic control over information, surveillance, and the means of force. People talk about the Internet as a revolutionary populist medium, but the Internet is essentially a marketing tool. They talk about terrorist groups as representatives of a civilization opposed to the West, but most terrorists are dissidents from the civilization they pretend to be fighting for. What this kind of talk mostly reveals is the nonexistence of any genuine alternative to modernization and Westernization. During the past fifty years, the world has undergone two processes. One is de-Stalinization, and the other is decolonization. The second is proving to be much more complicated than the first, and this is because the stamp of the West is all over the rest of the world, and the rest of the world is now putting its stamp on the West. There are no aboriginal civilizations to return to. You can regret the mess, but it’s too late to put the colors back in their jars.

And why isn’t internationalism, as a number of writers have recently argued, a powerful resource for Americans? The United States doesn’t have an exclusive interest in opposing and containing the forces of intolerance, superstition, and fanaticism; the whole world has an interest in opposing and containing those things. On September 12, 2001, the world was with us. Because of our government’s mad conviction that it was our way of life that was under attack, not the way of life of civilized human beings everywhere, and that only we knew what was best to do about it, we squandered our chance to be with the world. The observation is now so obvious as to be banal. That does not make it less painful.