CHAPTER ONE

THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

The First Colonies in What Was to Be the United States, c. 1505–1763

America is a young country with an old mentality. It has enjoyed the advantages of a child carefully brought up and thoroughly indoctrinated; it has been a wise child. But a wise child, an old head on young shoulders, always has a comic and an unpromising side.

~George Santayana, Winds of Doctrine (1913)

The first Europeans to settle in what is now the territory of the United States of America were three pigs and some goats. The year was 1505. The place was Puerto Rico.

When I was teaching at Tufts University, in Massachusetts, not far from the legendary Plymouth Rock where, according to a long-standing misconception, US history is commonly supposed to have “begun,” a vacancy occurred for a professor of history in the colonial period of what is now the United States. The best postdoctoral specialists in the period applied. We had the cream of the country to choose from. I asked all the candidates the same ques-
tion. It was rather a sneaky question, but not unfair in the circumstances: "Where, in what is now US territory, was the first enduring European colony, still occupied today, established?" Surely it was reasonable for a prospective or actual professor of the colonial period of the United States to know the answer. None of the young people who passed hopefully before our panel committed the folly of pointing in the direction of Plymouth Rock. "Jamestown, Virginia," was the unthinking answer of most candidates, reflecting the assumption that English colonists forged what became the United States, and built it from east to west. Others, more aware of the possibility of a trap, said, "It must be somewhere in Florida, or maybe the Southwest," and nominated San Agustín, Florida, or Santa Fe, New Mexico. These answers, though not strictly correct, were sensible. Europeans have been in continuous occupation at San Agustín since Spaniards fought Frenchmen for it in 1567. Santa Fe and El Paso were in Spanish hands from 1598—a decade before the colonization of Jamestown began—though Santa Fe was briefly evacuated during a seventeenth-century Indian revolt. The correct answer to the question about the location of the first permanent European colony in what is now US territory is, however, Puerto Rico, founded over a hundred years before Jamestown.

Yet nobody thinks of Puerto Rico as the place where US history began, partly because the island did not become US territory until 1902, when the republic had been in existence for fully a century and a quarter, if one counts from the Declaration of Independence, and the country already had a character and constitution to which Puerto Ricans had made no contribution. Obviously these are valid scruples. They account for why, in one of Stephen Sondheim's versions of his lyrics for West Side Story, he wrote that "nobody" in the United States knows that Puerto Rico is "in America."

But in part, Americans—including Puerto Ricans, sometimes—ignore or deliberately exclude Puerto Rico because of prejudice: prejudice that the United States is a country made by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, constructed by anglophone colonists, where concepts of liberty and law are defined by traditions that originated in England; where the English language is the basis of whatever cultural unity can be contrived among all the ethnicities that make up the population; and where you become "American"—or, more accurately, where you qualify to be a citizen of the United States—by subscribing to a canonical version of the history of the country that begins among English colonists on the east coast of the continent.

None of those prejudices is unquestionable. All are founded on shaky historical assumptions. No country has an unchanging essence. No community has an unchanging identity. What it means to be English or Chinese or Spanish or Indonesian or American changes all the time. There was never a time when most Americans, or most people in what is now the United States, were white English Protestants. The making of the country has been a collective effort—sometimes collaborative, sometimes conflictive—of all the ethnic and religious minorities who inhabit it. Native American "Indians" have been contributing for longer than Anglos. By the end of the colonial period, in much of the rural south, blacks counted for more in terms of numbers and perhaps effort than white English people. Over 40 percent of the population of Georgia and the Carolinas were black when the Declaration of Independence was signed. Without the input of other communities of European origin, the United States today would be unrecognizable. Without the migrants who have joined from Asia, especially in recent times, the future character and dynamic of the history of the United States would be very different and, probably, less successful in conventional terms—in terms, that is, of wealth and power—than it would otherwise be. I can imagine a US history textbook of the not-too-far-distant future beginning not with the arrival of Puritans in Massachusetts, or with English adventurers in Jamestown, or even with French and Spanish contenders in Florida, or conquistadores at El Paso or in New Mexico, but with three pigs and some goats in Puerto Rico. What might such a rewriting of the country's past look like?
oir of her Texan childhood, published in 1987, is the locus classicus. Speaking Spanish at recess merited “three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. . . . If you want to be American,” her teacher told her, “speak American. If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong.” César Chávez told a similar story about himself. So did Richard Rodríguez, a conservative opponent of affirmative action, who in his Hunger of Memory, published in 1981, focuses on an episode in his childhood when his teachers asked his parents—ostensibly for the sake of their child’s social and economic advancement—not to speak Spanish at home.

In an attempt to frustrate Spanish, most states of the Union have legislated for the exclusive official use of English. It is not clear what this means, or whether it would override a defendant’s right, for instance, to hear accusations and proffer defense in a language he or she dominates to perfection. People hostile to the use of Spanish have treated such laws as invitations to abuse. In one instance in Colorado, an elementary-school bus driver stopped children from speaking Spanish on their way to school. In 2004 in Scottsdale, Arizona, a teacher who slapped students for speaking Spanish in class claimed to be implementing English immersion policies. In Kansas City in 2005 school authorities suspended a student for speaking Spanish in a hallway, explaining, “This is not the first time we have [asked] Zach and others to not speak Spanish at school.”

Bilingual education has not worked because it has not been properly tried. Under present protocols, the effect is to mire economically deprived children in monoglot stagnation. Because they tend to be the poorest and most educationally deprived of Hispanics in the United States, fewer than 50 percent of Mexican immigrants speak fluent English. “They start below other Hispanics,” a leading authority tells us, “and never catch up.” Their children start school with little exposure to English. They are either condemned to enduring a disadvantage in competition with anglophone peers, or to nominally bilingual education—a term unimaginably interpreted in the United States to mean teaching Anglos in English and Hispanics in Spanish. In a genuinely bilingual system, both language communities would benefit from instruction in each other’s language, and school time divided equally between Spanish and English would be supplemented by subtitled television and e-entertainment that would encourage people to perfect their command of their second language.

The Netherlands and some Nordic countries have made English their own second language without even having native English-speaking communities. For the United States, the fact that a large number of native Spanish-speakers is at hand to help anglophones learn Spanish is a precious resource, which ought to be celebrated and encouraged. A bilingual United States would benefit not only from the cultural enrichment and life enhancement that command of more than one language brings to everyone who knows the pleasure and privilege of it, but would also better equip the country for the indelible political and economic future, immersed in hemispheric circles of trade and cooperation. It would also be popular. Opinion soundings show that just about every Hispanic parent in the country wants English to be a medium of instruction in schools, and that 87 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 88 percent of African-American parents want their children to know Spanish. To make real bilingualism happen, people who speak only one language have to overcome their fear of the other. In the United States the task is hard because the country happened to absorb vast numbers of immigrants during a brief period when linguistic nationalism dominated the world. The false assumption that national unity depends on the enforcement of linguistic conformity is an unfortunate legacy. Most other countries have gotten over it. The fact—which I declare on my faith as a historian—is that, typically, enduring and successful states have had more than one language and have been better and more robust in consequence.

Fears of Hispanics goes beyond fear of the need to learn a second language. For some well-educated but imperfectly rational people, it arises from cultural defensiveness: investment in the notion (which is false) that culture has essential, inalienable characteristics; the belief (which, as we shall see, is the next chapter, is invalid) that the culture
of the United States is characterized, in this essential sense, by a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant heritage; and the claim (which is questionable) that whatever is valuable in this culture is threatened by the presence of large numbers of people of different heritage. These are important fears (and we shall return to them in the next, final chapter); but I do not think many US citizens share them, except in connection with language. The fears that really impede Hispanics and inspire attempts to subordinate or exclude them are racial, demographic, and economic. Racism is always excited when an easily identifiable minority expands rapidly. To understand the force of racism when exerted against Hispanics, it is worth acknowledging that they are relatively philoprogenitive. During the generation of accelerated immigration from the mid-1960s, when white denizens of the United States were already anxious about being swamped by newcomers of unprecedentedly varied provenance and appearance, Hispanics' fertility boosted the numbers of their unfamiliar neighbors, while the whites' own fertility declined alarmingly. The proportion of births to non-Hispanic white mothers in that period fell from two-thirds to around one-third. Births to Hispanics rose to be more than half the total. These are just the sorts of circumstances one should expect to ignite racism. Associated fears arose from prejudices about Hispanics' social and economic condition: that they would impoverish the economy, degrade society, increase crime, spread disease, and multiply antisocial behavior. In 1971, when David Hayes-Bautista, an outstanding public health specialist at UCLA, published a prospect of the effects of the coming boom in Hispanics' numbers, he faced a barrage of adverse reaction from members of the public who, he observed, "imagined that Latinos were largely gang members, welfare mothers, high school dropouts, and drug users."

These opinions were durable. In 1994 California governor Pete Wilson's focus groups "denounced immigrants for ruining the state," taking jobs, crowding hospitals, gobbling tax dollars, and increasing crime rates. A great fear obsessed the state: undocumented migrants were so numerous that they would exhaust the state's resources. An advertisement for one state senator's reelection campaign claimed that "two thousand each night" slunk across the border. Petitioners alleged that the nightly total was 5,000. If true, this would produce an undocumented population of nearly 22 million, at a time when the total population of the state was only 27.8 million. In reality, there were almost certainly fewer than half a million undocumented people in California, probably closer to 250,000. Despite the absurd basis of the fears, Wilson proposed an initiative that set the pattern for a lot of recent anti-immigrant legislation. He wanted teachers and social workers to be made to deny services to "anyone who appeared to be illegal." Voters endorsed the policy in a referendum.

One effect was to animate Hispanic political activism. Another was to exacerbate intercommunal tensions. In a legal battle that continued for five years, Hispanic community organizations got the federal court to rule the proposal unconstitutional. They also achieved unprecedented success in uniting and mobilizing Hispanic voters. In 1990 there were only seven Hispanics in the state legislature. A decade later there were twenty-seven. Anglos fought back with traditional gerrymandering. Abuse of the redistricting system kept numbers of ethnic voters low in each district and created only one new Hispanic-majority district where the demographic logic mandated two. In September 2001 the Los Angeles Times reported that the plans for redrawing district boundaries "largely thwart the desires of Latinos and Asian Americans to win additional seats in Congress." The following month the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund filed a lawsuit against the scheme, but the court found that "the protection of an incumbent" was "a well-established, legitimate districting criterion" and pointed out, correctly, that non-Hispanics often voted for Hispanic candidates.

Meanwhile, across the country, deportations multiplied. A case that drew public attention in 1998 was that of John Collado, a successful, middle-aged family man from the Dominican Republic with three children and a restaurant of his own in New York. When he was a young immigrant, nineteen years old, he was arrested for fornicating with his consenting but underage girlfriend, which was not an offense punishable by deportation at the time. Nearly twenty-five years later,
immigration authorities arrested him, imprisoned him, and informed him that, as his offense had been reclassified, he would be deported. The courts freed him, but only after an ordeal of sixteen months, during which his life was subverted and his livelihood imperiled. Of 179,000 people deported the following year, more than 92 percent were Hispanic.

The fears that provoked these episodes, and continue to influence US politics, were and are illusory. The values that US voters hold dear are not on the whole peculiarly US values. Some are common, decent human values. Others are shared by the modern, democratic, capitalist world. Hispanics are commonly guardians and enthusiastic practitioners of the same values. Hayes-Bautista's 1971 study showed that despite "poor education and low incomes, most Latino populations . . . exhibit middle-class behaviors and extraordinary health outcomes. They do not fit a 'minority' model." They had the lowest death rates of comparable sections of the population, except in New Mexico and Colorado, and maintained good health records in spite of the poverty that restricted their access to insurance. Hispanic mothers gave birth to drug-exposed infants at only one-third the rate of non-Hispanic whites and one-tenth the African-American rate. A Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund advertisement in 1997 realistically showed Latinos teaching, returning from war, buying homes, and graduating, but the public rejected it because the image did not match the stereotype. In June 1999, Robert Lopez, a reporter who had been a schoolboy in a notorious Belmont, California, high school, found that of his Mexican and salvidoreno classmates, 77 percent went to college, 28 percent earned degrees (the same proportion as non-Hispanic whites statewide). Eighty percent had white-collar jobs and 34 percent were homeowners. Hayes-Bautista concluded that "from 1940 to 2000, Latinos have behaved more like members of the 'American' middle class than middle-class 'Americans' themselves have: Latinos exhibit the most vigorous workforce participation; the lowest public welfare usage; the strongest family structures; the fewest heart attacks; lower cancer rates and fewer strokes; the healthiest babies; and a five-year-longer life expectancy, compared to non-Hispanic whites and African Americans."

Fears are irrational and you cannot dispel them simply by demonstrating their false basis. They were containable while the economy was doing well. The eighties were boom time. In the nineties, the government paid off debt and ran up surpluses. Then, in 2001, George W. Bush took office as president and embarked on a risky strategy of simultaneously cutting taxes and increasing expenditure. Profligacy became uncontrollable when, with what at the time seemed stunning irresponsibility, the United States launched two concurrent wars, first in Afghanistan, then in Iraq. The wars proved budget-busting, or at least helped to bust the budget. As the United States plunged into deficit, the world's economy slowed. In 2008 it became apparent that US institutions—both public and private—had overinvested in property in the expectation of infinitely rising real estate prices. The property market collapsed. Leading banks defaulted. The government committed to hundreds of billions of dollars in bailouts for tottering businesses—money that, owing to the profligacy of the previous few years and the trillions wasted on the wars, it did not have. Europe, where some governments had been as prodigal as Mr. Bush, opted for austerity. The world flailed into recession.

One of the effects was to exacerbate unemployment in the United States and rekindle resentment of immigrants. Tom Tancredo, who sought the Republican nomination for the presidency in 2008 and got over 650,000 votes when he ran for the governorship of Colorado, was the most consistent spokesman for reawakened fears. He blamed terrorism in the United States on "twenty million aliens who have come to take our jobs." Calls for fencing the border—mandated by Congress in 2006 but only halfheartedly implemented or in some places abandoned as impractical, anti-environmental, morally repugnant, and economically destructive—became a thermometer for the heat of the passions involved. In 2010 Sarah Palin, the presidential hopeful who had been the Republicans' vice-presidential candidate in the last election, came out in favor of fencing the entire Mexican border, reinforcing it with ten or fifteen thousand National Guardsmen. Presidential
hopefuls for 2012 Michele Bachmann and Herman Cain were reported as saying that they wanted, respectively, a barrier “across every foot” of the frontier and an electrified wall that could kill people trying to enter illegally. In the 2012 general election, the Republicans’ official manifesto called for the completion of a fence along the entire border.

As usual in any persecution, the poorest and weakest were the first to suffer. There are all too many unintended jokes in the US Congress. But in September 2010, a real comedian spoke up before a subcommittee on immigration. The satirist Stephen Colbert appeared in the character he plays on television—a right-wing chat-show host who lampoons extremism by taking conservative positions to their logical conclusion. But there was a solemn side to his contribution. When committee members asked him serious questions, he suspended his comic role and replied seriously. His views were pertinent, because he was one of only a handful of committed respondents to a nationwide challenge from the United Farm Workers of America to “take our jobs”—to try their hands at the backbreaking, ill-paid work immigrants do in US orchards and fields. Rednecks and xenophobes charge Latino—chiefly Mexican—laborers with “taking our jobs.” So the union dared the grumblers to take some of those jobs back. The result demonstrated what anyone with any knowledge of the subject already knew: that immigrants accept work so hard and so unremittingly that citizens reject it. Far from taking citizens’ jobs, they keep vital sectors of the economy going.

A student at my university reported the conditions he observed in Immokalee, Florida. Journeymen had to line up every day before dawn in the hope of getting picked for a work gang. If they were lucky enough to attract a taskmaster’s attention, they struggled for ten hours in 100 degrees Fahrenheit, under a cruel sun and the weight of a thirty-two-pound bucket of tomatoes. To earn an amount equal to the minimum daily pay nominally allowed under the laws of the state, a worker would have to pick two and a quarter tons. Large numbers of workers have never negotiated the bureaucratic obstacles one must overcome to have the support of the legal and judicial system. So exploiters, intimidators, and blackmailers can victimize them unrestrainedly. Immigrants typically pay exorbitant sums for any transaction that demands documentation—deals on accommodation or loans or the costs of the money transfers on which their families back home depend. Employers can coerce them to the point of slavery. Application of antislavery legislation has freed more than a thousand workers in Florida in the last dozen years.

Racism is one of the characteristics of the white empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The subjection, subordina- tion, exploitation, and degradation of Americans of Spanish-speaking and Native American ancestry were steps along a single road that began with conquest. The way US employers have always undervalued Hispanic Americans’ labor is a means of calculating the oppression. Discriminatory differential wages succeeded virtual or actual peonage and coerced labor in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Anglos justified the discrimination on the grounds that inferiors did not need as much money as white people. When Congress outlawed racism, beginning with the series of civil rights acts from 1964, employers perpetuated the system by confining their victims to low categories of work and keeping skilled and managerial jobs for the master class.

The main target of revived fear has been the migrants we commonly refer to as “illegals.” The term is hateful, because most people in the category are law-abiding. “Illegals” are often in the United States because of official connivance to meet labor needs. Under a statute of 1986 (see above, p. 279), which was deliberately framed to keep agriculture supplied, the Immigration and Naturalization Service turned a blind eye perhaps to as many as 600,000 imperfectly documented workers. The act made no provision for families of amnesty illegals to join them, and an amendment proposed in 1989 to remedy that definition failed because of delays in Congress. Many undocumented immigrants have an idealistic or romanticized notion of the United States as a country where the rule of law can be respected. In most cases the only laws they might consciously have evaded are, to them, oppressive, denying them a livelihood or the right to family life.

I write with feeling because I think of the woman who used to
clean my apartment when I lived in Somerville, in suburban Boston, Massachusetts. I do not know her immigration status, but an allusion she once made to the cost of her journey to the United States from her homeland in Central America made me think that she had been in the hands of extortionists. She was a profoundly good woman: selfless, generous, sentimental, unswerving, impressively hardworking, and devoted, often to the point of tears, to the children she had left at home, whom she was working to educate. She was always cheerful, but below the surface of her smiles she endured suffering only dispelled on the day she could show me the photos of her boy and girl in their graduation outfits. The United States, it seemed to me, was better for having such people in it. I could not understand how anyone would want to pass legislation to victimize someone so deserving.

In 2009–11, however, such legislation cascaded onto the statute books or stacked up in court corridors. It started in Arizona in April 2009, when Governor Jan Brewer signed a bill that, according to President Barack Obama, would “undermine basic notions of fairness that we cherish as Americans, as well as the trust between police and our communities that is so crucial to keeping us safe.” The law, which the Supreme Court upheld, makes it a crime for an immigrant to be unable to show proof of status if challenged by the police. It also mandates police to demand to see the documents of anyone “where reasonable suspicion exists that a person is an unauthorized alien,” and jail people on suspicion of being in the country illegally. Typically, victims will stay in jail until their immigration status can be confirmed. To immigrants, this looks like a move to encourage the sort of harassment and discrimination against Hispanics, regardless of their citizenship status, typical of such infamous precedents as Operation Wetback and the periodic, vindictive roundups of potential deportees that seem to happen whenever the US economy is in serious trouble. Arizona’s legislature has also endorsed a plan to fence off the state’s entire southern border, at an estimated cost of $3 million a mile, to be raised with private donations.

Alabama followed Arizona’s lead in June 2011, making it a crime to be an illegal immigrant in the state of Alabama, on pain of up to a year’s imprisonment. The law’s sponsor, Republican representative Micky Hammon, was frank about the nature of his bill, which, he said, “attacks every aspect of an illegal alien’s life” and “is designed to make it difficult for them to live here so they will deport themselves.” The 2012 Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, endorsed the measure. In Georgia, a similar law the following month enjoyed the patronage of former gubernatorial candidate Nathan Deal, who advocated punishing the children of undocumented immigrants by withholding health care and barring them from college education. Unless the courts overrule it, his law will replicate the contents of those of Arizona and Alabama, while also imposing on employers the obligation of checking the status of every employee against federal records. Deal’s proposal for meeting the employment shortfall in agriculture, as migrants fled Georgia, was to fill the 11,000 openings with some of the state’s 100,000 ex-convicts, about 25 percent of whom are unemployed. Early in 2011 South Carolina enacted a similar law, which, to supplement the measures introduced in other states, established a special police force dedicated to the pursuit and punishment of imperfectly documented immigrants.

Meanwhile, vigilantes had been patrolling the border and undertaking persecutions of their own. From 2005, an organization that called itself Minutemen intimidated immigrants with videos that appeared to show killings of alleged illegals. Arnold Schwarzenegger, governor of California, praised the vigilantes “terrific” work and said that they were welcome to patrol the California border. Suspicions abounded that the Minutemen really did undertake violence and commit murders in the course of victimizing immigrants. In February 2011 a long-standing Minutemen operative, Shawna Forde, who had long criminal record, including offenses of burglary and prostitution, was convicted of the murder of a nine-year-old girl and her Mexican-American father in their home in Arivaca, Arizona. According to allegations made in court, her aim was to steal funds to support vigilante operations. In an interview she explained that she was resisting “getting third-world values in a first-rate country.”

By then, however, a reaction seemed to be setting in. Arizona leg-
islators dropped a series of even more draconian measures that were on their way to the statute books: these would have evicted undocumented immigrants from their homes, banned them from schools and colleges, and made it a crime for them to drive. Realization had settled in that the persecution of a critical part of the labor force would cripple the state. "It's time for us to call time out," explained a state senator. Utah demonstrated that it was possible to formulate a law that addressed public concerns about undocumented immigrants without cruelty and without inflicting much economic damage on the state. The Utah Compact, which the Chamber of Commerce drafted, called for "a focus on families and empathy in immigration policy, and using police to fight crime rather than enforce immigration laws." The legislature responded, limiting police investigations of immigrants' status to cases of serious suspected crime and creating a fast track, via an amnesty and a means-adjusted fine, to official work permits for undocumented immigrants of blemishless record.

It looks, therefore, as if the Hispanic minority is going to continue to grow, and that even the undocumented immigrants will be allowed to augment it. A CNN report of May 24, 2011, summed up the statistics. The Hispanic population exceeds 50 million, a 43 percent increase from a decade previously. Hispanics account for more than half of the nation's overall growth of 27.3 million. A quarter of US Americans under eighteen years old are Hispanic. Between censuses, the Hispanic population more than doubled in nine states, including Alabama, Kentucky, and Maryland. In New Mexico, the Hispanic population (46 percent) exceeds the white population (40 percent). In some city concentrations the numbers are even more impressive, because nearly half the nation's Hispanics live in just ten metropolitan areas: 5.7 million of them—11 percent of the national total and 45 percent of the city—are in Los Angeles alone. In Miami, 66 percent of the population are Hispanics, who are also a substantial majority in San Antonio. In Riverside, they constitute the biggest community, at 47 percent of the total urban population. They account for about a third of the populations of Houston and Phoenix and exceed 20 percent in New York, Dallas, San Francisco, and Chicago. Hispanics have become the country's biggest official ethnic minority. In the 1970s they were little more than half as numerous as blacks. In the 1990s they approached parity. By 2010 they numbered 47.8 million, more than blacks and Asians together.

In one of his Mambo Mouth videos, John Leguizamo plays with amusing mock-menace on Anglo fears of a Hispanic takeover of the United States. "We were here first," he points out, summarizing, in effect, the first couple of chapters of this book. He reminds Anglos how they need Hispanics to keep their country clean and make guacamole. "We'll push you so far up," he threatens, "you'll be in Canada. We won't deport you, we'll let you clean our toilets." The audience laughs good-naturedly, showing that they take this seriously, if at all, only as an ironic inversion of the way Hispanics have been treated. Nobody expects Hispanic revanche. The chances of fellow feeling embracing a large proportion of the Hispanic people of the United States are good, but if this happens, it will be on the basis of a common religion—and we have seen how limited is the potential of religion to bring Hispanics together or galvanize them in action—or of the Spanish language, which still does not command universal allegiance and which may not endure. Rehispanicization is most likely to be a relatively painless process. For reasons we must now address, it may even benefit the United States in future in previously unanticipated ways.
Massachusetts. We disagreed about almost everything academic, but he was a delightful man, infinitely courteous, with the quality of character that academics need more, perhaps, than any other, if they are to be happy in their profession: he would not take professional disagreements personally.

When we met, I had written a duly appreciative but broadly adverse review of his best-known book, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order. In that work, published in 1996, he predicted that the era of global ideological conflicts, which was coming to an end with the collapse of most of the communist “bloc,” would yield to a period in which civilizations—generally but not consistently characterized in terms of their religious traditions—would be the foci of contention. The concept was amazingly influential. Fanatics rushed to realize it, moderates to forestall it. Both focused on it. Huntington’s categories disposed people to think that opposition between communism and capitalism would yield to conflict between Islam and the West. The prophecy seemed to come true, perhaps because it had the power of self-fulfillment.

I rejected the Huntington thesis partly because of my reading of history, which, I think, shows that collaboration is normal between civilizations and religious communities: even those with histories scarred by conflict, like Islam and Christendom, have spent longer in fruitful dialogue than at war. Partly, too, my own experience of belonging to more than one culture has convinced me that loyalties to civilizations are too weak and overlapping on their own to inspire violence. Talking it over with Sam, I found that he was by no means the rigid, reactionary authoritarian his foes depicted, though he found it hard to believe—hard, perhaps, to understand—the experience of a cultural mongrel like me, who could belong to more than one tradition without sacrifice of love or loyalty. We never got around to thrashing out our differences over his next controversial book, Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity, which appeared three years before the author’s death. Pressure of work kept me from reading it for a while. By the time I got around to it, it was too late.

Huntington’s book had a minatory tone of la patrie en danger from
immigrants. His quarrel was not with immigrants, whose value he acknowledged and appreciated. But he did reject pluralism. For him, the only good immigrant was an assimilated one. He interpreted the commonplace characterization of the United States as “a nation of immigrants” in a distinctive way, insisting that newcomers joined a country that already had a definitive culture made not by immigrants but by settlers in its formative period, which he dated to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I would have liked to talk with him about that. Culture is not—it seems to me—like a house whose character is fixed when the building is completed. It is a much more flexible kind of edifice, which is never finished but changes continually, at different paces and rhythms at different times, like the home of Jerome Kern’s “Folks Who Live on the Hill.” There is no moment at which we can say that the process is arrested. The character of the house depends on the décor and on the changing composition of the residents, as well as the external building. Late additions to the structure, moreover, can develop it and improve it. People who came to the United States after 1776, or 1784, or 1865, or whatever date one cares to assign, contributed to the developing culture, just as those who preceded them did.

In three important ways, Huntington distinguished nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants from their successors in the 1960s and after. First, he claimed that the earlier migrants had to make a total commitment to their new country because of the effort they endured, the ties they severed, and the difficulty of keeping in touch with their former homes. Recent immigrants, by contrast, could travel with relative ease, retain ties with home, and even uphold dual nationality. (These points, I think, are good ones, although there is room to debate whether they constitute a problem rather than an opportunity.) Second, according to Huntington, the new wave of immigrants was special because Hispanics predominated.

Never before had a single linguistic minority been so numerous in the United States. Here again, Huntington was right about the facts, at least for the period before the 1986 legislation opened up immigration from Asia and Africa (see above, p. 279), but the fears he felt as a result were misplaced.

His first fear was for the place of the English language in US culture. As the last chapter made clear, I am not sanguine about the survival of Spanish as the country’s second language, but if the United States really were to become bilingual, I think it would be very much to the country’s enrichment and advantage. Still, Huntington believed that Hispanics menaced more than the linguistic status quo. He thought they had a culture of mañanismo, putting work off till tomorrow, and were relatively unschooled in participatory civic, institutional, and political life. On these points, I think he was simply wrong—misled in part by a traditional caricature of Latin laziness and anarcho-sympathy, and in part by his own experience of Latin America. He had advised the Brazilian government on democratization in the 1970s, urging a gradual approach—not without the selective use of repressive measures—and was inclined to attribute the ultimate success of democracy in that country to his own prudent counsel.

When Sam was dying, one sentence in his book resonated vexingly in my mind and I would have loved to pick over it with him: “Would the U.S.,” he asked rhetorically, “be the country it has been and largely remains today if it had been settled in the 17th and 18th centuries not by British Protestants but by French, Spanish or Portuguese Catholics?”

The question, like all counterfactual questions, is tiresome because it is hard enough to know what did happen in the past without worrying about what might have happened if what did happen had not happened. In practice we use counterfactuals all the time in order to identify real or plausible relationships of cause and effect. I have done so repeatedly myself in the course of this book. But counterfactuals only make sense in contrast with genuine facts.

The factual basis of Huntington’s question is false. A lot of what is now the United States was settled by French and Spanish Catholics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Not all the British settlers were Protestants. Quite a lot of the country was settled, involuntarily, by Africans, who numerically matched or exceeded Protestants of British origin in many regions. Until 1804, most of what is now US territory belonged to the empires of romance-speaking, Catholic powers. All states where more than 20 percent of the population is
Hispanic today were acquired from Spain between 1810, when the United States annexed the so-called Republic of West Florida (see above, p. 126), and 1848, when the Treaty of Hidalgo-Guadalupe ended the Mexican War. The Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819, in which Spain, beleaguered by widespread rebellions, ceded the rest of Florida in exchange for US renunciation of claims to Texas, was the main intermediate event in the sequence.

In any case, Huntington’s question makes no allowance for the variety of the United States. This is a mistake more commonly made by outsiders, especially Europeans, who tend to assume that the US is culturally homogeneous. But those of us who live there and look around the place can see that there is at least as much difference between, say, Minnesota and Alabama as between New Mexico and, say, Sonora. In order to understand the United States, it may make better sense to compare parts of it with parts of other countries than to limit comparisons between unwieldily huge units whose borders are, in any case, often arbitrary—the results of historical compromises rather than of real cultural or environmental boundaries. It may be more instructive, for instance, to compare California with Baja California, or the Great Plains with the pampa, than to compare the whole of the US with the whole of Mexico or the whole of Argentina.

Belief in the exceptional character of the United States underpins Huntington’s question, whereas it is at least worth asking whether it is helpful to emphasize US exceptionalism. All countries are exceptional in the sense of having features that distinguish them from all others. All are exempt from some generalizations. But is the United States more exceptional than anywhere else? Is it, as a whole, more different, say, from Argentina than, say, Chile is from Belize, or Canada from Paraguay?

The assumptions of Huntington’s question are culturalist: that is, the questioner assumes that cultural influences were uniquely responsible for shaping the history of the country. But culture and environment penetrate and affect each other and should never be considered in isolation. A glance at a map is sufficient to suggest that the implication of Huntington’s question—that the United States is different from Latin America—can be understood at least as much as an effect of environment as of culture (though of course both have their place in any explanation that aims to be complete). The main reason why parts of the United States are extremely unlike most of Latin America is that the hemisphere is top-heavy, skewed towards the north, so that the United States and Canada have no fully tropical zones, and the rest of the Americas have no boreal ones. The United States has a vast amount of land that belongs, ecologically speaking, in the category of temperate forest, of which there is relatively little elsewhere in the Americas.

The biggest single difference, if one compares what we loosely call Latin America collectively with the United States and Canada, is that from the Rio Grande to the Paraguay, European colonists encountered large, densely settled incumbent populations with whom they could collaborate in building colonial societies, whereas in what became the United States and Canada, Native American peoples—or “First Nations” in Canadian parlance—were too thinly distributed to be useful as a pool of labor. Their economic traditions were, for colonists’ purposes, unexploitable. Therefore the United States became a land of white people and black slaves, where the Native Americans were exterminated or expelled or confined to tiny patches. Meanwhile, all the countries of Latin America except Chile and Argentina (whose histories resemble that of the United States in many respects) retained huge indigenous populations and elements of precolonial economies and culture.

Where there are duplications of environment, however, between parts of the United States and parts of Latin America, one finds that the economies and cultures are similar too. Ranching is an outstanding example. Highland farming, too, is similar, with similar crops, in Idaho and in Peru. The same strains of wheat grow equally well in parts of Mexico as in parts of Washington State. Arid desert is much the same, in effect, wherever you find it. Québec is Catholic and romance-speaking, but politics and economics there resemble