

# A Quilt of a Country

Anna Quindlen

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## ESSAY TOPICS

## Summary

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### Summary: “A Quilt of a Country”

The essay “A Quilt of a Country” was written by Anna Quindlen and first published on September 26, 2001, in the online edition of *Newsweek* magazine. Born in Philadelphia in 1953, Quindlen is a prolific journalist turned novelist who published extensively in the *New York Post* and the *New York Times*, winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for her column in the latter. Between 1999 and 2009, she contributed a biweekly column to *Newsweek*; this essay appeared as part of that series. Written after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it explores themes like **Patriotism and National Identity, Multiculturalism in the United States, and American Exceptionalism**.

**Content Warning:** The source material references terrorism, anti-gay violence, and racial and religious prejudice, including Islamophobia.

Quindlen opens her essay by positing her view of America as an essentially diverse country—a “mongrel nation” (1)—and introducing the metaphor of America as a patchwork quilt. She also notes a contradiction about the American psyche: that it is both individualistic and egalitarian. She enumerates examples of how the United States has often fallen short of its egalitarian ideal. Nevertheless, she suggests that the US possesses something “spectacularly successful” (2), though she does not yet reveal what it is.

Subsequently, Quindlen speaks of a “prideful apartheid”, i.e., ethnic divisions, in America. Despite what historians think, Quindlen suggests that this fragmentation, which she refers to as “Balkanization” (3), is nothing new. She draws from her personal history as a child of what was then considered a “mixed” marriage, between an Irish American man and an Italian American woman. She suggests that today’s enmity between, for example, Mexicans and Cambodians will sound as “quaint” one day as the differences between Irish people and Italians already seem. She draws on literature dealing with America’s mythologized past—e.g., *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*—to illustrate her point that ethnic divisions have always existed.

At the halfway point in the essay, Quindlen posits a series of rhetorical questions about the “point” of such a heterogeneous country. Other countries, she notes, have broken apart along ethnic fault lines. Various conflicts throughout the 20th century, such as the World Wars and the Cold War, galvanized the American populace against a common enemy. Quindlen argues that since the threat of the Cold War evaporated, there has been fear that internal divisions might overwhelm the country. However, in the wake of the recent terrorist attack on American soil, Americans once more have a common enemy to rally against.

The author praises the US for being a unique country in its multiculturalism. While avoiding “trying to isolate anything remotely resembling a national character” (6), she nevertheless explains what she believes to be the main influences and/or behaviors that shape the American psyche and its propensity toward unity. She believes that Americans as a whole fundamentally believe in two things: conquering nearly impossible challenges (according to the spirit of Calvinism) and equal opportunities/egalitarianism.

In the final paragraph, Quindlen tries to settle on a word to encapsulate American coexistence. She takes issue with the concept of tolerance, claiming that it is too “vanilla-pudding” and does not go far enough to promote unity. She is not satisfied with “pride” either, but she settles on defining patriotism as taking pride in the country’s ability to be so plural yet continue to exist as one. She references those who died in the attack on the World Trade Center, highlighting how, when their photographs emerge, their faces will represent the country’s ethnic diversity. She concludes by again invoking the metaphor of the “mongrel nation” (8), admiring the United States for its unified spirit and unlikely success.

# Background

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## Historical Context: The 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

**Content Warning:** This section references terrorism and racial and religious prejudice, including Islamophobia.

The events of September 11, 2001, and its aftermath were a watershed moment in American and world history. In this unprecedented attack on American soil, 19 al-Qaeda militants hijacked four commercial airplanes in a coordinated attack against the United States. Two planes struck the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, causing their collapse. A third plane struck the Pentagon, the headquarters of the US military in Arlington, Virginia. The fourth plane, intended to target a federal building in Washington, DC, crashed in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, after passengers revolted against the hijackers. Almost 3,000 individuals lost their lives in the attacks, leading to major domestic and foreign policy shifts, including initiatives to combat terrorism that would impact the United States and the world for decades to come.

The 9/11 attacks immediately triggered rising Islamophobia among the American populace. Studies conducted in the period following the attacks showed “low levels of awareness about basic elements of Islam but growing anxiety about Islam’s (especially Islamic fundamentalism’s) compatibility with Western values of tolerance, acceptance, and civility” (Panagopoulos, Costas. “Trends: Arab and Muslim Americans and Islam in the Aftermath of 9/11,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 4, Winter 2006, pp. 608-24). Despite then-President George W. Bush condemning discrimination, there was nevertheless a climate of increased suspicion about Muslim and Arab Americans (or those perceived to be so), and there were even racist acts of violence committed against them.

Quindlen wrote this essay in the immediate aftermath of these events and in direct response to them. Against the backdrop of this recent collective national trauma, she aims to comfort and guide the reader. She also challenges the reader to reflect on America’s strengths, and most of all to not let the enemy divide and conquer American society. Given this tense historical context, her essay promotes unity over divisiveness, redirecting the surge of **Patriotism and National Identity** that the attacks inspired away from xenophobia and toward **Multiculturalism in the United States**.

## Essay Analysis

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### Analysis: “A Quilt of a Country”

**Content Warning:** This section references terrorism and racial and religious prejudice, including Islamophobia.

Quindlen’s essay is brief, combining persuasion, sociohistorical arguments, and anecdotal and personal expository. In just eight paragraphs, she uses logos (appeals based on reasoning), ethos (appeals based on moral character), and pathos (appeals based on emotion) to persuade the reader of her point. While the essay does not follow a rigid structure, a rhetorical arc is nevertheless evident. The first half highlights and diagnoses problems with American society, particularly as they relate to the country living up to its ideal of egalitarianism. At about the midway point, Quindlen posits some questions related to these problems, offering some resolution in the essay’s second half while leaving other questions open for the reader to reflect upon.

Published for a wide readership in *Newsweek’s* online edition, the intended audience of this essay is all Americans. Quindlen may particularly be trying to reach those who are questioning what it means to be American or who are especially susceptible to scapegoating other Americans. Quindlen wrote this essay in the aftermath of an unprecedented traumatic event in US history. Americans were still in shock and trying to make sense of the 9/11 attacks, and in some cases that meant trying to figure out whom to blame. Implicitly, she is cautioning the reader not to equate Muslim Americans (whom she invokes without naming directly as those “currently under suspicion”) with the extremist external enemy (8). Through rhetorical questions, she appeals to her readers’ sense of fairness and belief in the “American dream” to convince them of her arguments in favor of cultural pluralism.

One of the themes that permeates this essay is, therefore, **Multiculturalism in the United States**. At the time Quindlen was writing, the notion that the United States is or should be a “melting pot” was already falling out of favor. The metaphor of the melting pot signifies that all the different cultures and ethnicities that make up the United States eventually meld together and form a homogenous mixture. This necessarily implies a stripping away of differences. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, celebrates rather than erases cultural differences while also positing an overarching unity. Quindlen’s quilt metaphor aligns mostly

with this model: Each individual square maintains its differentiated identity, and the whole quilt is better for it. This is how Quindlen interprets the US motto, “Out of many, one,” which she cites in her opening paragraph.

Nationalism, or what it means to have pride in the country, is a related theme. In the concluding paragraph, Quindlen makes her stance clear that patriotism is “taking pride in this unlikely ability to throw all of us together” (8). This is what makes her proud to be an American, and, in this essay, she has tried to persuade readers that pluralism is in fact one of the nation’s greatest assets. This understanding of **Patriotism and National Identity** opposes that notion of American pride that entails having unquestioning faith in the country’s institutions or fitting into a pre-existing rigid and singular concept of what it means to be American.

Quindlen ties her project of combatting Islamophobia and prejudice in general to her efforts to comfort the populace. What unites Americans across ethnic and religious differences, she argues, is a Calvinist-inflected psyche that loves challenges. In this, she is perhaps also writing for the enemy, who, in addition to causing massive destruction of human life and challenging US national security, was trying to attack the national spirit. Quindlen comforts the reader with her way of dealing with the exceptionality of the moment, which is by implying that it is not really that exceptional at all; there have been many instances of ethnic animosity within America’s borders throughout history. This encourages the reader to deduce that this too shall pass.

Quindlen’s tone is at once informative and straightforward. She establishes familiarity by addressing the reader directly in the second person and by divulging her personal origins to the reader. This intimacy is itself an act of unification and a gesture intended to provide solace. Despite her sometimes somber tone, Quindlen also ends on an optimistic note. She invokes the portraits of the diverse victims of the World Trade Center attack, implying that hateful acts toward fellow Americans should not be committed in their name, as it would be illogical and hypocritical: The victims come from all backgrounds, representing the makeup of the entire country rather than a limited and prejudiced view of what makes someone a “real” American (i.e., whiteness). She states that when the United States does succeed in living up to its multicultural, heterogenous, and egalitarian ideal, then it really is something to admire—a “wonder.” This is her version of **American Exceptionalism**, or the belief that the United States is a special and distinct nation.



## Key Figures

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### Anna Quindlen

Quindlen is a journalist and opinion columnist as well as an author of bestseller fiction, nonfiction, and self-help books; some of her novels have been adapted into feature films. Her accolades include authoring a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and winning the Pulitzer Prize for her column in the *New York Times*. More recently, she published *Write for Your Life* (2022), a book about the importance of writing as a personal practice.

Quindlen was born and raised in Philadelphia to an Irish American father and Italian American mother. “A Quilt of a Country” draws on this personal experience of growing up in an ethnically diverse household. She highlights that while most 21st-century readers would consider her lineage quintessentially American, it was once controversial. She thus draws a parallel between America’s history and its present, nudging the reader to conclude that one day more recent immigrant arrivals will also be considered “one of us.”

Quindlen’s writing style in her opinion columns has drawn criticism for (allegedly) arguing points that few readers would object to—i.e., “preaching to the choir” to appeal to readers. It has also been argued that her style of personalizing tragedies to draw on readers’ empathy in fact minimizes the specificities and true nature of a given event.

## Themes

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### Patriotism and National Identity

One of the most salient themes Quindlen explores is how to define patriotism and national identity—or rather, what these concepts actually mean in the American context. The essay proposes her own criteria for national pride and patriotism.

In his seminal and oft-cited book on the subject, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1991). This concept of belonging to a nation emerged with and through a common language and discourse that itself resulted from the 15th-century proliferation of the printing press. Anderson employs the term “imagined” not to mean that the nation does not exist but to argue that it exists because of its members reading the same texts and inhabiting a shared mental landscape. More recently, the media and national news have come to occupy the role of “texts,” shaping a common perception of the nation.

Thus, despite their seemingly infinite differences, Americans ostensibly perceive themselves as part of a common group. However, this does not explain what the defining characteristics of this group are—that is, what holds (or should hold) the sense of nation together. Quindlen’s essay dialogues with this debate regarding “Americanness.” Her notion of patriotism is an open one that acknowledges and embraces plurality, as opposed to a more closed perception that defines being American using exclusionary criteria (e.g., white, Anglo, Protestant, heterosexual, etc.).

Though Quindlen postulates that there is no singular national character, this does not mean there are no national tendencies or behaviors that keep the country unified. Quindlen’s United States is imagined as a nation held together by a love for conquering challenges and by a generalized belief in fairness. Most importantly (if paradoxically), Quindlen argues that America’s defining quality is its plurality: What binds the country together is its embrace of difference. She tries to persuade the reader that this is also its *best* quality, reminding readers that the perception of what is considered plural or different has shifted over time.

Though Quindlen is primarily concerned with combatting racially or ethnically restrictive criteria for “Americanness,” it is worth noting that her definition of patriotism also implies the embrace of ideological differences; the intrinsic value of pluralism is baked into her argument. In this, her position is similar to the philosophy of “civic nationalism,” which grounds national identity in shared political culture—typically, one that embraces pluralism (among other things). Civic nationalism is often juxtaposed with “cultural nationalism,” which implies a more sweeping set of shared values as the basis for national identity and often (though not always) overlaps with ethnic identity. These divergent notions of patriotism have informed debates such as that surrounding NFL player Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling for the national anthem, variously interpreted as an embrace of an American value (the right to protest) or as disrespectful to the American flag. Quindlen’s position places her in the same camp as Kaepernick—both view the nation as stronger for its difference in viewpoints.

### Multiculturalism in the United States

The essay’s title and central metaphor of the quilt dialogue with the concept of multiculturalism, for which Quindlen is mostly advocating. Multiculturalism is a complex concept that can be understood through the lens of political philosophy, sociology, policymaking, and more. It generally involves ethnic/cultural pluralism within a particular community or country, either as the result of waves of immigration or of long-standing cultural differences within a region’s borders. It is both a concept that is descriptive (explaining the actual state of things) and a philosophy that is prescriptive (explaining how things ought to be).

In the United States, multiculturalism is not firmly established as policy at the federal level, but it is implemented throughout the country to varying degrees, depending on factors such as the ethnic and cultural makeup of a particular area and/or the political philosophy of the region’s dominant lawmakers. Multiculturalism has tended to increase over the course of US history due to repeated waves of immigration. It is considered the dominant philosophy in American universities and has unseated the “melting pot” paradigm that arose in the 19th and 20th centuries. The melting metaphor signifies the mixing and amalgamation of different immigrant groups into a more homogenous cultural stock. It is a concept that in part describes what happened historically, since a large portion of Americans are in fact the result of this ethnic “mixing.” This corresponds to Quindlen’s metaphor of a “mongrel nation,” which she uses in a descriptive capacity to characterize the United States.

However, the melting pot as a prescriptive philosophy has declined in popularity because it implies assimilation into a preexisting, dominant culture. Quindlen argues that America's strength and pride lie in both the differences between its constituent parts and its simultaneous ability to stand together as one nation. This is where Quindlen's metaphor of the quilt comes into play. She argues for multiculturalism with a degree of integration (represented by the stitches that make the squares overlap and bring them together as a whole) instead of total assimilation of differences (each square remains distinct in texture, pattern, color, etc.). Other metaphors advocates of multiculturalism have used include the "salad bowl" or "mosaic". These terms emphasize the heterogeneity of the constituent ingredients or pieces, which nevertheless come together to form a whole dish or artwork (i.e., a nation).

Opposition to multiculturalism is frequently underpinned by the belief that the nation possesses a certain (ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic, etc.) essence that should be maintained and is being actively endangered by newcomers bringing their own cultures. In the case of the United States, opposition to multiculturalism tends to be bound up with the idea of whiteness and the anxiety among some white Americans that they will no longer constitute a dominant majority of the population in the future. Although Quindlen does not discuss hostility to multiculturalism at length, she alludes to this strain of sentiment with her dismissal of the "English-only advocates" (7). Here, language stands in for a broader set of cultural and ethnic characteristics that some would seek to ground national identity in. Quindlen suggests that such a position is almost willfully ignorant, as anyone assessing the country honestly will conclude that multiculturalism has always existed: "[M]ost [...] admit that [...] the new immigrants are not so different from our own parents or grandparents" (7).

### American Exceptionalism

Quindlen draws on some tropes related to the concept of American exceptionalism—the belief that the United States is inherently different from other countries (typically with the implication that those differences are positive). In some ways, this concept overlaps with the ideal of the "American dream." The perceived differences may include the circumstances of the US's founding (i.e., Puritan settlers' cultural and moral tendencies), America's commitment to capitalist democracy, its status as a military and economic superpower, its social mobility, or (as Quindlen highlights) its culturally and ethnically diverse composition. She dedicates a significant portion of the essay to discussing what makes the US distinct

from other countries, historically and sociologically. For example, she refers to a study in which the respondents agreed that “[t]he US is a unique country that stands for something special in the world” (6), which she interprets in favor of her argument that the United States is a uniquely diverse nation.

Most factors cited in connection to American exceptionalism have drawn criticism, either on the grounds that they are not unique (e.g., Is the United States really more multicultural than some European countries?) or on the grounds that they are not in fact desirable (e.g., Is America’s economic system really working well for everybody?). It is nevertheless a powerful notion that has guided American domestic and foreign policy throughout its history, including as a justification for intervening in other countries’ affairs. This is also controversial, as some would argue that American foreign policy has overstepped the fine line between the belief that the United States is unique and the belief that it is superior (and therefore entitled to play a disproportionately powerful role on the world stage).

Though Quindlen acknowledges the US has often fallen short of its ideals, she hangs on to a sense of American exceptionalism, even lamenting the fact that discussion of the country’s flaws can obscure what is “spectacularly successful” about it. Ultimately, she defines patriotism as “partly taking pride in this unlikely ability to throw all of us together in a country that across its length and breadth is as different as a dozen countries” (8). Whether this would satisfy critics of American exceptionalism is debatable, as it can in practice be difficult to disentangle a view of US civic society as exceptional from the impulse to export it elsewhere; even plurality can (ironically) be used as a justification for foreign policy interventions in other countries.

## Index of Terms

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### Abet

This term means to assist or encourage, especially in the context of committing an offense. Quindlen uses it to present the two factors she feels help shape American **Patriotism and National Identity**: the Calvinist tendency to accept difficult challenges and a sense of fairness. By stating that these factors “abet” the American concept of unity, she underscores that unity is something Americans embrace almost despite themselves. Quindlen would certainly not suggest that national cohesion is wrong—she is arguing in favor of one form of it—but she does suggest that Americans treat it as though it *were* wrong, as with the “grudging fairness” they show immigrants (7). The term thus points to one of the many paradoxes of Quindlen’s essay.

### Apartheid

This is a term originating from the Afrikaans language of South Africa and means “separateness.” It refers specifically to the policy of racial segregation adopted by the white supremacist South African government in 1948 and in place until the early 1990s. The term can also apply more broadly to official or unofficial situations of racial segregation within a society, usually in a spatial sense (i.e., groups not only have distinct rights and privileges, but are also prevented from cohabitating). Quindlen uses the term in a more figurative way, referring to voluntary cultural and ethnic segregation among Americans.

### Balkanized

Quindlen uses this term to refer to fragmentation and segregation of US neighborhoods along ethnic or religious lines. The term was coined in the early 19th century, referring specifically to the ethnic divisions of the Balkan peninsula. It is considered a pejorative, leveled both at warring factions as well as at separatists who are viewed as impeding national unity. Quindlen employs the term to emphasize how ethnic divisions are nothing new; in her view, the United States is in fact less divided than it was before.

## Mongrel

This term traditionally refers to a mixed-breed dog, or a “mutt.” It generally is pejorative, although it can have an endearing connotation when used in reference to oneself. Quindlen uses the term in both the opening and closing paragraphs, referring to the United States as a “mongrel nation.” As a metaphor for **Multiculturalism in the United States**, the image complements that of the quilt, implying a greater degree of cultural mixing. It also communicates a certain optimism about the future of the United States, made stronger and healthier by the coming together of its disparate parts (just as mixed-breed dogs tend to be healthier due to their diverse genetic makeup).

In both places where the phrase “mongrel nation” appears, it is accompanied by the expression “improbable idea,” also referring to the United States. This suggests that what is “improbable” about the US is not merely the fact that its multiculturalism (mostly) works, but rather that it is something to aspire to and cherish. “Mongrels” are not traditionally the most sought-after pets, but according to Quindlen, the nation’s mixed composition is indeed an ideal.

## WASP

This term is an acronym that stands for “White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.” While Anglo-Saxon refers specifically to people from England, the term is sometimes used more broadly to encompass all Protestant Americans of Northern or Northwestern European ancestry. This ethnoreligious group has historically comprised the wealthy elite of American society, though its dominance has declined somewhat since the country’s founding. Quindlen uses the term “uninflected WASP suburbs” when citing literary depictions of America’s ethnically divided past (3), describing such suburbs as segregated “ghettos.”

## Literary Devices

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### Allusion

**Content Warning:** This section references terrorism.

Various types of allusion—references to well-known people, events, works of art, etc.—appear throughout the essay. Quindlen crams three into one sentence: “The Brooklyn of Francie Nolan’s famous tree, the Newark of which Portnoy complained, even the uninflected WASP suburbs of Cheever’s characters: they are ghettos, pure and simple” (3). By citing these works of American literature, Quindlen aims to dispel the notion that ethnic divisions are anything new; rather, they are well-documented in the US literary canon. Quindlen also conjures the patriotic and ubiquitous song “America the Beautiful” as she cites the verse “crown thy good with brotherhood” (2), inviting the reader to determine whether the United States has lived up to its ideal of universal “brotherhood.” Her opening paragraph references the US motto, “Out of many, one,” to lay the groundwork for her discussion of **Multiculturalism in the United States**, which examines the nature of that “one.”

Read through the lens of the present, it could also be said that the essay employs historical allusion, as there is no explicit mention of the events of 9/11 until the last paragraph. Instead, Quindlen references the attack through phrases like “this moment [of] enormous tragedy” (2), or “at times like this” (8). While the author’s motivation for writing this piece would have been apparent at the time (just over two weeks after the attack), it now requires prior knowledge of the essay’s historical context to be fully understood.

### Metaphor

The quilt is the central metaphor of this piece, introduced in the title and explained in the first paragraph. “Built of bits and pieces that seem discordant” (1), the quilt functions both as a metaphor for the cultural plurality of the United States and as a symbol of American culture, belonging to its folk-art tradition. Just as the US comprises many distinct ethnic and religious groups, the different textures and colors of the “velvet and calico and checks and brocades” make up one vibrant and diverse whole (1). Similarly, “mongrel” is a term the author uses to open and close the essay—a metaphor that also represents the cultural plurality of the United States. In this case, the image evokes a United States that is a blend of different ethnicities and cultures rather than a patchwork of wholly distinct ones.



## Oxymoron and Paradox

Quindlen uses several phrases that on the surface appear to be contradictory, but upon deeper reflection encapsulate her central arguments. Some examples include: “this splintered whole” (4), “impossibly interwoven” (4), and “fractured coalescing” (7). All three oxymorons—pairings of apparently opposing words—use descriptive language to communicate the idea of a heterogenous, diverse, and sometimes conflicting country, which nevertheless also exists as one interdependent and fused entity.

These expressions exemplify the overall tension characterizing this essay—between conflict and unity, and failure and success as a nation—that must ultimately arrive at a synthesis. Quindlen thus uses oxymorons to explicate the broader paradoxes of her argument. Though similar to oxymorons, paradoxes join together seemingly opposing ideas (rather than merely words). As Quindlen describes it, the US is itself paradoxical in nature.

## Rhetorical Question

Quindlen employs this rhetorical device five times throughout the essay, raising questions without providing clear answers. This device promotes active readership, inviting the reader to complete the dialogue. When she asks, “Do the Cambodians and the Mexicans in California coexist less easily today than did the Irish and Italians of Massachusetts a century ago?” (3), she immediately engages with the reader further, saying “You know the answer” (3). In this case, the essay presents a straightforward yes/no question, and readers can infer that the answer they are expected to give is “no,” thus aiding the author to demonstrate her point. In another example, the answer is less straightforward: “What is the point of this splintered whole?” (4). Quindlen repeats “What is the point [...]?” three more times in the same paragraph, underscoring the question’s importance while also suggesting its persistence (i.e., the difficulty of answering it). As the essay continues, there are some hints to help readers resolve this question, at least partially.

## Important Quotes

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1. **Content Warning:** This section references terrorism, anti-gay violence, and racial and religious prejudice, including Islamophobia.

“America is an improbable idea. A mongrel nation built of ever-changing disparate parts, it is held together by a notion, the notion that all men are created equal, though everyone knows that most men consider themselves better than someone.”

(Paragraph 1)

*Quindlen introduces the essay’s central problem/contradiction with a thought-provoking, if not controversial, statement regarding **Multiculturalism in the United States**. The United States is an unusually diverse country; all that holds it together, she says, is its foundational notion of equality. However, this notion has never fully been actualized—in fact, most people don’t fully believe in equality—raising further questions about how it can function as a binding force.*

2. “That’s because it was built of bits and pieces that seem discordant, like the crazy quilts that have been one of its great folk-art forms, velvet and calico and checks and brocades. Out of many, one. That is the ideal.”

(Paragraph 1)

*This passage introduces the titular quilt metaphor. Just like the colorful and clashing fabrics that make up this national art form, the United States comprises diverse groups with varying degrees of peaceful coexistence. Its strength is in its diversity—at least, “that is the ideal.”*

3. “The reality is often quite different, a great national striving consisting frequently of failure. Many of the oft-told stories of the most pluralistic nation on earth are stories not of tolerance, but of bigotry. Slavery and sweatshops, the burning of crosses and the ostracism of the other. Children learn in social-studies class and in the news of the lynching of blacks, the denial of rights to women, the murders of gay men. It is difficult to know how to convince them that this amounts to ‘crown thy good with brotherhood,’ that amid all the failures is something spectacularly successful.”

(Paragraph 2)

*Quindlen notes that historically the United States has not lived up to the ideal of equality.*

*Some have viewed diversity and multiculturalism not as a strength, but as sources of fear and unease, even resorting to violence in their attempts to make the nation more homogenous. The author invokes lyrics from the patriotic song “America the Beautiful” to defend the ideal, despite America’s failures in consistently enacting it.*

4. “This is a nation founded on a conundrum, what Mario Cuomo has characterized as ‘community added to individualism.’ These two are our defining ideals; they are also in constant conflict. Historians today bemoan the ascendancy of a kind of prideful apartheid in America, saying that the clinging to ethnicity, in background and custom, has undermined the concept of unity. These historians must have forgotten the past, or have gilded it.”

(Paragraph 3)

*Mario Cuomo was the former governor of New York, historically one of the most multicultural states in America. The allusion introduces yet another contradiction that characterizes the nation. The idea(l) of individualism—the belief that society should be made up of individuals independently pursuing their satisfactions and self-fulfillment—is deeply embedded in American culture. The sense of community is “added” to this, almost as an afterthought, and these two ideals are in constant conflict because they create conflicting interests.*

5. “The New York of my children is no more Balkanized, probably less so, than the Philadelphia of my father, in which Jewish boys would walk several blocks out of their way to avoid the Irish divide of Chester Avenue.”

(Paragraph 3)

*The “Irish divide of Chester Avenue” references the unofficial border of the Irish and non-Irish neighborhood in Philadelphia during the time period when Quindlen’s father was a child. The implication is that there have always been ethnic/religious divisions in America; however, these divisions have tended to dissolve over time. The implication is that today’s hostilities will also one day be forgotten.*

6. “Do the Cambodians and the Mexicans in California coexist less easily today than did the Irish and Italians of Massachusetts a century ago? You know the answer.”

(Paragraph 3)

*The implication here is that the social divisions of today, however insurmountable they may seem, will be bridged in the future, just as those between Irish and Italian Americans have been. In addition, Cambodian and Mexican Americans will cease to be seen as “non-Americans”, much like the Irish and Italians—once viewed as “others”—have.*

7. “What is the point of a nation in which one part seems to be always on the verge of fisticuffs with another, blacks and whites, gays and straights, left and right, Pole and Chinese and Puerto Rican and Slovenian? Other countries with such divisions have in fact divided into new nations with new names, but not this one, impossibly interwoven even in its hostilities.” (Paragraph 4)

*The essay reaches a rhetorical climax here, as Quindlen poses a question to which there is no explicit answer. One possible answer is **American Exceptionalism**—i.e., that “the point” of the United States is its uniqueness. Specifically, Quindlen suggests, the US is exceptional in the multiculturalism embedded in its national ethos. Diversity is so “interwoven” (even geographically) that it would be impossible for the US to fragment into different countries along ethnic lines.*

8. “Once these disparate parts were held together by a common enemy, by the fault lines of world wars and the electrified fence of communism. With the end of the cold war there was the creeping concern that without a focus for hatred and distrust, a sense of national identity would evaporate, that the left side of the hyphen—African-American, Mexican-American, Irish-American—would overwhelm the right. And slow-growing domestic traumas like economic unrest and increasing crime seemed more likely to emphasize division than community.” (Paragraph 5)

*Quindlen suggests that having foreign adversaries against whom people can direct their hostilities has helped to prevent internal divisions within the United States. However, she implies that this speaks partly to the absence of effective domestic economic and social policy, which tends to exacerbate the ethnic tensions that have sometimes simmered over.*

9. “Today the citizens of the United States have come together once more because of armed conflict and enemy attack. Terrorism has led to devastation—and unity.” (Paragraph 5)

*Quindlen finds the silver lining of the situation and encourages unity by using paradox, which she visually suggests with the dash that both separates and links “devastation” and “unity.” She posits that the United States once again finds itself before a common enemy against which people can put their differences aside and come together.*

10. “Yet even in 1994, the overwhelming majority of those surveyed by the National Opinion Research Center agreed with this statement: ‘The US is a unique country that stands for something special in the world.’ One of the things that it stands for is this vexing notion that a great nation can consist entirely of refugees from other nations, that people of different, even warring religions and cultures can live, if not side by side, then on either side of the country’s Chester Avenues.”

(Paragraph 6)

*This is an appeal to logic, citing scientific evidence from a survey. Quindlen employs this device partly to rebut the claim that America would implode and fall prey to internal divisions without a common external enemy. Without more context, it’s unclear what those surveyed find “special” about the US, so the implication that the survey shows a firm belief in diversity is debatable. On the other hand, Quindlen may be staking a claim about what America should stand for rather than what it in fact does.*

11. “Faced with this diversity there is little point in trying to isolate anything remotely resembling a national character, but there are two strains of behavior that, however tenuously, abet the concept of unity. There is that Calvinist undercurrent in the American psyche that loves the difficult, the demanding, that sees mastering the impossible, whether it be prairie or subway, as a test of character, and so glories in the struggle of this fractured coalescing. And there is a grudging fairness among the citizens of the United States that eventually leads most to admit that, no matter what the English-only advocates try to suggest, the new immigrants are not so different from our own parents or grandparents.”

(Paragraphs 6 - 7)

*This quote attempts to explain what universally held beliefs, if any, characterize American society. Some of the first white settlers in the US were Calvinists, i.e., reformist Protestants, and Quindlen sees their influence in the form of a strong work ethic and the embracing of challenges. The second claim is that Americans know that they are all descended from immigrants, and so they see a part of themselves reflected in new immigrants and believe in equal opportunities for all.*

12. “Leonel Castillo, former director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and himself the grandson of Mexican immigrants, once told the writer Studs Terkel proudly, ‘The old neighborhood Ma-Pa stores are still around. They are not Italian or Jewish or Eastern European anymore. Ma and Pa are now Korean, Vietnamese, Iraqi, Jordanian, Latin American. They live in the store. They work seven days a week. Their kids are doing well in school. They’re making it. Sound familiar?’”

(Paragraph 7)

*The author draws a parallel between European immigrants once considered questionably American and newcomers of non-European descent. She highlights that they are all hard-working people and uses a quotation that addresses the reader directly, asking them to draw the parallel.*

13. “Tolerance is the word used most often when this kind of coexistence succeeds, but tolerance is a vanilla-pudding word, standing for little more than the allowance of letting others live unremarked and unmolested.”

(Paragraph 8)

*Quindlen takes issue with the concept of “tolerance,” which is lauded as a way of ensuring peaceful coexistence. She feels that merely tolerating others does not go far enough to achieve a harmonious society.*

14. “Pride seems excessive, given the American willingness to endlessly complain about them, them being whoever is new, different, unknown or currently under suspicion. But patriotism is partly taking pride in this unlikely ability to throw all of us together in a country that across its length and breadth is as different as a dozen countries, and still be able to call it by one name.”

(Paragraph 8)

*Quindlen defines **Patriotism and National Identity** not as uniformity or unthinking adherence to a set of norms or values, but as pride in America’s diverse makeup and respect for its differences. She is saying that Americans should take pride in America standing for the freedom to be different. Her mention of “those currently under suspicion” alludes to hostility toward Muslim Americans in the aftermath of 9/11.*

15. “When photographs of the faces of all those who died in the World Trade Center destruction are assembled in one place, it will be possible to trace in the skin color, the shape of the eyes and the noses, the texture of the hair, a map of the world. These are the representatives of a mongrel nation that somehow, at times like this, has one spirit. Like many improbable ideas, when it actually works, it’s a wonder.”

(Paragraph 8)

*The essay concludes with a repetition of the “mongrel” metaphor that was introduced in the opening paragraph. However, the quilt metaphor gives way to a tapestry of the faces of 9/11’s victims. Instead of the “velvet and calico and checks and brocades” (1), Quindlen now imagines a patchwork of different skin colors, eyes, noses, and hair textures—giving a more poignant dimension to the “Quilt of a Country” metaphor.*

## Essay Topics

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1. Quindlen uses quotes from notable figures to bolster her argument. For example, she cites historian Daniel J. Boorstin, who wrote, "Of all the nations in the world, the United States was built in nobody's image" (1). How does Quindlen interpret this quote? Conduct some research into the source text by Boorstin. What do you think he means? Does Quindlen use this quote in a way that is faithful to Boorstin's argument? Use evidence to back up your claim.
2. Quindlen argues that the United States is a dynamic nation that nevertheless maintains "two strains of behavior," one of which she attributes to colonial settlers of what would become the United States. Do a little research into the beliefs and customs of this group. Do you think there is still a detectable influence of this group in the present-day United States, as Quindlen claims (and/or in other ways which she does not mention)? Support your answer with evidence from your research.
3. Quindlen refers to the United States using the metaphors of the "quilt" and the "mongrel." Explore the meaning and implications of each metaphor in relation to the country's ethnically/racially plural quality, comparing and contrasting them. What does each represent, and why might Quindlen feel both are necessary?
4. Discuss Quindlen's references to foundational American texts like the Declaration of Independence ("all men are created equal"). Why does she incorporate these allusions into her argument?
5. In Paragraph 8, Quindlen suggests that the United States is a nation that consists "entirely of refugees from other nations." What does she mean? Why do you think she makes this claim? What effect does it have on the reader?
6. There have been major shifts in the way information is shared among members of a nation (and the world community) since Quindlen published this piece in 2001. What are some issues Quindlen's call for unity might not have anticipated? Discuss how the internet and social media shape notions of belonging to a nation.



7. What does Quindlen mean when she writes that the United States is “impossibly interwoven even in its hostilities” (4)? What are some examples of countries that have split into new ones within the last century? What were the factors leading to fragmentation, and how is the United States different (assuming that it is)?
8. One could argue that Quindlen misuses the term “apartheid,” equating it with voluntary segregation when in fact apartheid refers not only to segregation, but segregation that results from unequal power dynamics. That is, it entails one dominant group imposing its will upon the rest, with the support of the state. Why do you think she uses this term here and what is the effect of doing so?
9. Quindlen’s writing style has been critiqued for emotional excesses, i.e., an excessive use of pathos at the expense of facts. What are some examples of her use of pathos to engage the reader in this essay? What emotions does she attempt to draw on and why?
10. Quindlen includes repeated images of fault lines and barriers in her essay, from the “electrified fence of communism” to the “hyphen” in terms like “Irish-American” (5). How does this imagery develop Quindlen’s themes?