SURELY THE MOST TEDIOUSLY repetitive chore facing the writer on nationalism is the need to preface each new piece with his or her answer to the question, “What is a nation?”. The task can be avoided only at the risk of being thoroughly misunderstood, for nation and its derivative, nationalism, mean different things to different people. Indeed, slipshod and inconsistent terminology remain the bane of the study on nationalism. As noted elsewhere:

Where today is the study of nationalism? In this Alice-in-Wonderland world in which nation usually means state, in which nation-state usually means multination-state, and in which ethnicity, primordialism, pluralism, tribalism, regionalism, communalism, parochialism and sub-nationalism usually mean loyalty to the nation, it should come as no surprise that the nature of nationalism remains essentially unprobed. Indeed, careless vocabulary has even precluded a realistic assessment of the magnitude of nationalism’s revolutionary potentiality (Connor, 1978: 396).

Perhaps, then, it would be helpful at the outset to state what a nation is not. Despite its habitual misuse as a synonym for either (1) a state (for example, the League of Nations, the United Nations) or (2) the population of a state without regard to its ethnic composition (for example, “the British nation,” even though the British people are composed, inter alia, of the Cornish, English, Manx, Scottish, and Welsh nations), the nation is neither. “The American nation,” whether used in reference to the country called the United States or in reference to the multi-ethnic citizenry of that country, is also a misnomer.

In its pristine meaning, a nation is a group of people whose members believe they are ancestrally related. It is the largest group to share such a myth of common descent; it is, in a sentient sense, the fully extended family. In some cases, the myth of common descent has been given specific content through putative ties to a legendary figure (Noah has been particularly popular) or to an earlier people (Trojans, Phoenicians, and one of the ten lost tribes of Israel have all been broadly claimed as progenitors).

While interesting, such genealogical specificity is not essential to that intuitive sense of kinship which is the glue of the national bond. Indeed, where such a genealogical myth exists, it is often most questionable whether the preponderant number of members of a nation are aware of it. Familiarity with Irish mythology and the name of Cuchulain is no more essential to a sense of being Irish than is a knowledge of the O’Connell family’s genealogy essential

* Department of Political Science, Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut 06106, U.S.A.
for a person with that surname to feel that he is descended from a line of O'Connells stretching back to a pre-recorded era. Moreover, a specific myth of national descent which proves voguish for a time within certain circles, may be subsequently replaced by a totally incompatible myth of descent, or even jettisoned without replacement, while causing no perceptible damage to the sense of nationalism. Furthermore, several contending genealogical myths may exist coterminously, also without perceptible effect on a national identity. The Basque nation is illustrative: Today there are still those who maintain that the Basques are descendants of the survivors of the lost continent, Atlantis. Others claim they are one of the long lost tribes of Israel. Some claim the Basques to be the only direct descendants of the Cro-Magnon people who dwelt in south-western Europe some thirty to forty thousand years ago. Others hold that they descend from a people who migrated from the Caucasus. Yet still others maintain that the Basques came originally from northern Africa. But amidst this proliferation of contending accounts of their ancestry, Basque nationalists are agreed on one point: the Basques are a distinct national group, unrelated to all those around them.

A myth with content is therefore not essential to nationhood. All that is irreducibly required for the existence of a nation is that the members share an intuitive sense of the group’s separate origin and evolution. To aver that one is a member of the Japanese, German, or Thai nation is not merely to identify oneself with the Japanese, German, or Thai people of today, but with that people and its saga throughout time. Logically, such a sense of one’s nation must rest upon a presumption that somewhere in a hazy, pre-recorded era there existed a Japanese, German, or Thai Adam and Eve. But logic operates in the realm of the rational and conscious; convictions concerning the singular origin and evolution of one’s nation belong to the realm of the non-rational and subconscious.

Because its roots lie in the subconscious, rather than in reason, the conviction that one’s nation was somehow created sui generis and remained essentially unadulterated down to the present is immunized against contrary fact. There is hardly a nation whom historians have not established to be the offspring of several ethnic strains. The English, for example, are (at the least) a compound of Celtic Briton with a heavy overlay of Germanic Angle, Saxon, Jute, Dane, and Norman; The French are a concoction of Celtic Gaul and Germanic Frank, Burgundian, Norman, and Visigoth. And a physical anthropologist has recently cast serious doubt upon the Japanese claim of ethnically pure descent (New York Times, 6 June 1989). But knowledge of contrary data and even its rational acceptance need not alter the subconscious conviction that one’s nation has been ethnically hermetical. Despite the past infusion of Teutonic blood, an Englishman senses no kinship with a German.

From what has already been said, it is clear that the myth of common descent which defines the nation will seldom accord with factual history, and this divergence is what has led many students of nationalism astray. After noting that most nations can be shown to be the offspring of several peoples, they have