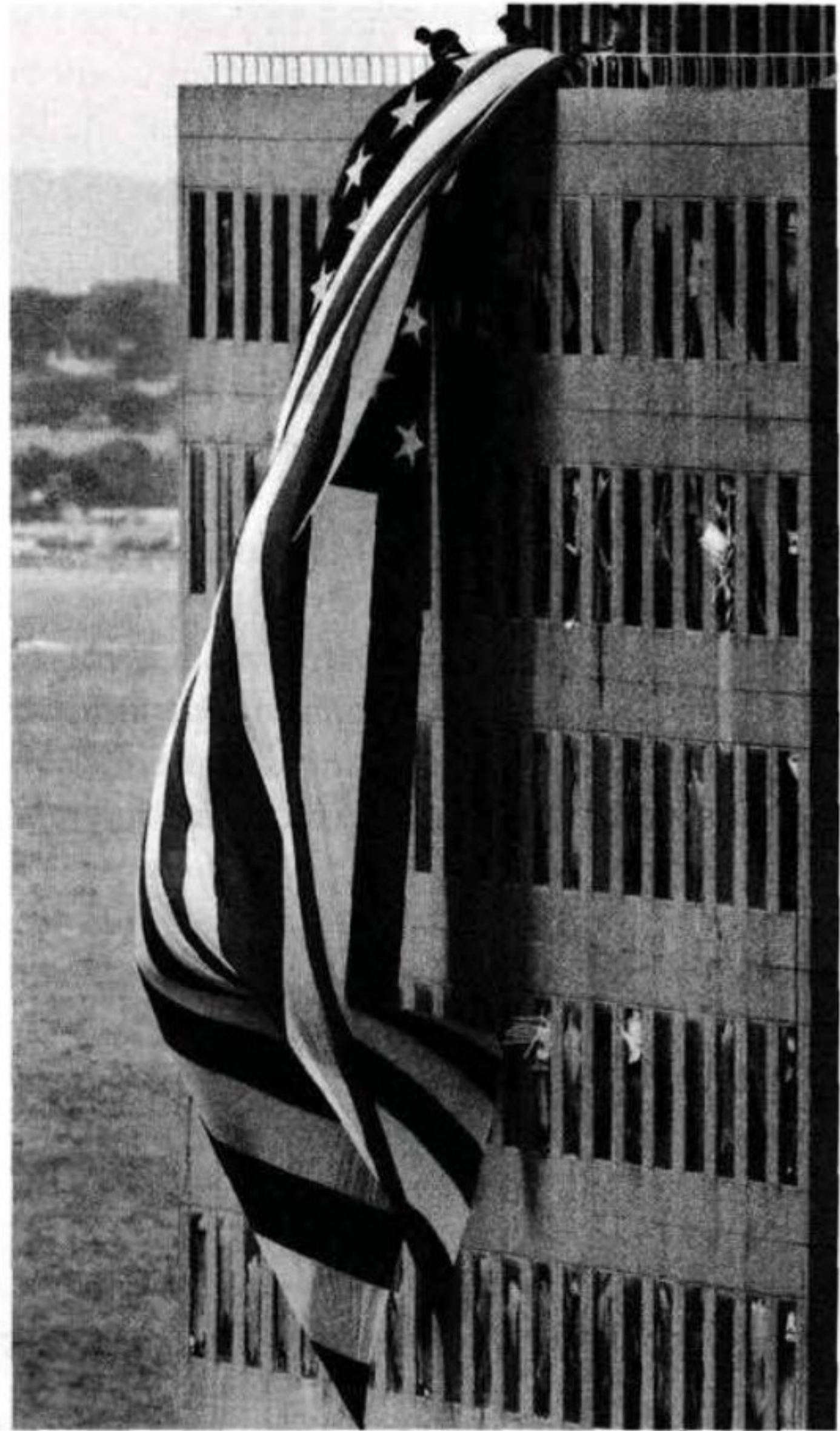


19 Immediately, there was an outpouring of love, charity, and patriotism around the country. So many people volunteered to help that officials had to limit the numbers. Millions of dollars were raised for the families of the victims, and Americans felt a huge surge of pride and love for their country. Eighty percent of them displayed the American flag—in the windows of their houses, on their cars, even on their clothing. People hung flags and put up signs on highway overpasses and bridges. And over and over, crowds spontaneously sang “God Bless America,” a patriotic song that is more popular (and much easier to sing) than the national anthem, along with “America the Beautiful” and “My Country ’Tis of Thee.”

20 This mixture of religion and patriotism is what some scholars have called the “national religion” of the United States. The roots of the national religion go back to colonial times. In the countries from which the American colonists emigrated, the dominant values of the nation were often supported by an organized national church. Although Americans made certain that no organized national church would exist in their young country, they have over the years developed a number of informal practices which combine national patriotism with religion. The main function of this national religion is to provide support for the dominant values of the nation, and comfort in times of grief. Thus, it does in an informal and less organized way what nationally organized churches did for European nations in earlier times.

21 Some observers of American society believe that the various practices that are called the national religion can have harmful effects, however. Sometimes these practices can help to create a climate in which disagreement with current national practices is discouraged or not tolerated. There have been times when citizens have disagreed with their government’s decision to wage war, for example, and other Americans accused them of being unpatriotic. This happened during the war in Vietnam, when protesters were told, “America—love it, or leave it.” A similar division of opinion occurred over the U.S. decision to invade Iraq in 2003.



Firefighters hang a giant American flag over the side of the American Express tower.

Religious Diversity in the United States: A Spiritual Kaleidoscope⁸

22 **T**he belief that the individual, not the organized church, should be the center of religious life has encouraged a tolerance and acceptance of all faiths. This climate of religious freedom has, of course, strengthened the development of cultural

⁸ **kaleidoscope:** colors or patterns that change quickly

pluralism in the United States. Today there is growing religious diversity. *The World Almanac* now lists over 140 different religious groups that each have at least 5,000 members, and other estimates are that there are at least 2,000 distinct religious groups in the United States.

- 23 Wade Clark Roof, a professor of religion and society, cites four trends that are creating a spiritual kaleidoscope in the United States. First, there is the change from being a “Protestant-Catholic-Jewish nation” to one with multiple religions. The number of Protestants has declined to a little over 50 percent, and if trends continue, they will probably be in the minority in the next decade. The number of Catholics is increasing due to the large numbers of Latin American Catholic immigrants, who now make up about half the total Catholic community. The number of Jews has stayed the same in recent years, but the number of Americans who choose “Other or None” when asked their religious preference is growing. The number of Muslims, for example, has increased to the point that some estimates are that there are now as many Muslims as there are Jews in the United States.
- 24 Second, there is religious “expressive individualism,” the switching of faiths—from one Protestant denomination to another, or even from one faith to another. Also, within the various faiths, Americans are now picking and choosing among the beliefs, particularly in the mainline faiths. Roof calls this “the privatizing of organized religion,” the search for a personal religious identity. For some, this results in a stronger faith; for others, it does not.
- 25 Third, there are many new religious organizational structures emerging in the United States. Some are ethnic denominations such as the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, while others are “special purpose groups”—such as support groups or groups to help the homeless or clean up the environment. Some groups are “liberal, oriented to reforming society; others are conservative, aimed at reforming individual lives,” Roof says. He observes the same trend toward fragmentation that Michael J. Weiss noted in his description of American lifestyles, mentioned in Chapter 1. However, Roof says that these new special interest groups are energizing the American religious community.



Muslim men at worship in an Islamic mosque in Florida

26 The fourth trend is toward a new spirituality, especially among young Americans. Many young people prefer to identify themselves as being *spiritual*, rather than *religious*. The majority prefer also to explore the beliefs of several religions, rather than just one. In a survey that Roof conducted, he found that 22 percent of young Americans believe in reincarnation, and many are attracted to Eastern religious teachings. They are looking for a belief system that will help them grow and improve as individuals; they are not interested in participating in a religion out of duty.

27 Most Americans believe that religious freedom must be protected; that everyone has the right to practice his or her own religion without interference by the government or anyone else. While the majority of Americans follow the Judeo-Christian tradition, they also believe that freedom of religion should be a basic American right.

28 America's religious heritage seems to have encouraged certain basic values that members of many diverse faiths find easy to accept. This has helped to unite many different religious groups in the United States without requiring any to abandon their faiths. Cultural and religious pluralism has also created a context of tolerance that further strengthens the American reality of many different religions living peacefully within a single nation.



Buddhist women in Los Angeles celebrate the Thai New Year, pouring water on monks' hands.