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## A Shopping Guernica Captures the Moment

By PETER S. GOODMAN

From the Great Depression, we remember the bread lines. From the oil shocks of the 1970s, we recall lines of cars snaking from gas stations. And from our current moment, we may come to remember scenes like the one at a Long Island Wal-Mart in the dawn after Thanksgiving, when 2,000 frantic shoppers trampled to death an employee who stood between them and the bargains within.

It was a tragedy, yet it did not feel like an accident. All those people were there, lined up in the cold and darkness, because of sophisticated marketing forces that have produced this day now called Black Friday. They were engaging in early-morning shopping as contact sport. American business has long excelled at creating a sense of shortage amid abundance, an anxiety that one must act now or miss out.

This year, that anxiety comes with special intensity for everyone involved — for shoppers, fully cognizant of the immense strains on the economy, which has made bargains more crucial than ever; for the stores, now grappling with what could be among the weakest holiday seasons on record; and for policy makers around the planet, grappling with how to substitute for the suddenly beleaguered American consumer, whose proclivities for new gadgets and clothing has long been the engine of economic growth from Guangzhou to Guatemala City.

For decades, Americans have been effectively programmed to shop. China, Japan and other foreign powers have provided the wherewithal to purchase their goods by buying staggering quantities of American debt. Financial institutions have scattered credit card offers as if they were takeout menus and turned our houses into A.T.M.'s. Hollywood and Madison Avenue have excelled at persuading us that the holiday season is a time to spend lavishly or risk being found insufficiently appreciative of our loved ones.

After 9/11, President Bush dispatched Americans to the malls as a patriotic act. When the economy faltered early this year, the government gave out tax rebate checks and told people to spend. In a sense, those Chinese-made flat-screen televisions sitting inside Wal-Mart have become American comfort food.

And yet the ability to spend is constricting rapidly. Credit card limits are getting cut. Millions of Americans now owe the bank more than the value of their homes, making further borrowing impossible. The banks themselves are hunkered down, just hoping to survive.

Live within our means and save: This new commandment has entered the conversation, colliding with the deeply embedded imperative to spend. And yet much of the distress is less the product of extravagance than the result of the fact that in many households the means are nowhere near enough for traditional middle-class lives.

Wages for most Americans have fallen in real terms over the last eight years. Pensions have been turned into 401(k) plans that have just relinquished half their value to an angry market. Health benefits have been downgraded or eliminated altogether. Working hours are being slashed, and full-time workers are having to settle for jobs through temp agencies.

Indeed, this was the situation for the unfortunate man who found himself working at the Valley Stream Wal-Mart at 5 a.m. Friday, a temp at a company emblematic of low wages and weak benefits, earning his dollars by trying to police an unruly crowd worried about missing out.

In a sense, the American economy has become a kind of piñata — lots of treats in there, but no guarantee that you will get any, making people prone to frenzy and sending some home bruised.

It seemed fitting then, in a tragic way, that the holiday season began with violence fueled by desperation; with a mob making a frantic reach for things they wanted badly, knowing they might go home empty-handed.

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Pablo Picasso 1937: *Guernica*



1. What iconic images or scenes of the past century does the writer evoke in his description of Black Friday? What is the purpose?

2. Who does the author say is responsible for the phenomenon of Black Friday? Does he think it's a positive or negative aspect of American culture? Why?

3. What special significance did this year's Black Friday hold for shoppers, businesses and even policy makers?

4. To what does the author compare the American economy? Do you agree or disagree with this simile?

5. What has the government's position been on spending in recent years?

6. What is the challenge facing American consumers right now?

7. Why do you think the article's headline includes a reference to the Picasso painting "Guernica"? What does that suggest?