

Black Friday: A frenzied celebration of consumer culture

The holiday shopping season is off to a “robust start,” said **Anne D’Innocenzio** in the *Associated Press*. Some of the chaotic scenes that unfolded in shopping malls and big-box stores across the nation on “Black Friday” last week may have been unfortunate: In Los Angeles, a woman allegedly pepper-sprayed 20 fellow shoppers fighting over discounted Xbox consoles, while in a Wal-Mart in Little Rock, Ark., a riot broke out over \$2 waffle irons. But when the frenzy was over, the nation’s retailers reported takings of \$52.4 billion—up a whopping 16.7 percent from last year. Experts caution not to read too much into these numbers, said **Mark Memmott** in *NPR.org*, but with consumer spending representing 70 percent of the U.S. economy, any sign that the nation’s shoppers are “feeling good this holiday season” is a reason for optimism.

These sales figures mean nothing, said **Miguel Bustillo** in *The Wall Street Journal*. Retailers were so desperate to get this holiday shopping season off to a good start that they flooded the market with more ridiculously low “door-buster” offers than usual. Some even went so far as to start Black Friday at 11 p.m. on Thanksgiving itself and stay open all night. These extraordinary efforts may have merely “prodded shoppers to spend sooner, not necessarily buy more overall.” The fact that people are willing to fight over a \$2 waffle iron hardly means “that happy days are here again,” said **Andrew Leonard** in *Salon.com*. Far from it. The kind of frantic bargain-hunting we saw last week had a real smell of desperation about it—“yet more proof that money is tight, and Americans are stretching every dollar to the max.”

I smell something even more disturbing, said **Lee Siegel** in



Harvesting TVs in California

TheDailyBeast.com. This used to be a nation of strong communities where neighbors looked out for one another.

But America has devolved into a soulless Temple of Mammon, where we worship “selfishness, greed, and bad taste.” When the temple doors open, throngs rush in, and shove one another aside to get “50 percent off two lipsticks” or cheap appliances they’ll forget in a month. “The spectacle of human beings transformed into baying hounds by the false promise of *things* is almost on a par with the grotesque social engineering of Stalin and Mao.”

Let’s stop this “demonization of consumer culture,” said **James Livingston** in the *Los Angeles Times*. Millions of people are suffering real hardship in the global economic slowdown, and what will help lift us out—and get people back to work—is the robust consumption of goods. Besides, people hunt bargains on Black Friday not out of selfishness but to afford nice Christmas presents, and “to create new circuits of feeling among friends and family.” I reluctantly got in line at 2:30 a.m. to buy a laptop for \$198, said **Ken Grimm** in the *San Angelo, Texas, Standard-Times*, and the experience “changed my outlook on this yearly event forever.” For more than two hours, my line mates and I swapped stories, and among them was a man with advanced lung cancer who was hoping to get two computers for his children, to encourage their education after he was gone, and an immigrant from Romania who hoped a computer would enable him to stay in touch with his family back home. When I left the store in the predawn gloom, we were all friends, and I had acquired not only an inexpensive new computer but “something I consider much more valuable—that thing called the Christmas spirit.”