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Wal-Mart Invades Earth

BY BARBARA EHRENREICH

It's torn cities apart from Inglewood to Chicago and engulfed the entire state of Vermont. Now the conflict's gone national as a presidential campaign issue, with John Kerry hammering the megaretailer for its abysmally low wages and Dick Cheney praising it for its "spirit of enterprise, fair dealing and integrity." This could be the central battle of the 21st century: Earth people versus the Wal-Martians.

No one knows exactly when the pod landed on our planet, but it seemed normal enough during its early years of gentle expansion. Almost too normal, if you thought about it, with those smiley faces and red-white-and-blue bunting, like the space invaders in a 1950's sci-fi flick when they put on their human suits.

Then it began to grow. By 2000, measures of mere size -- bigger than General Motors! richer than Switzerland! -- no longer told the whole story. It's the velocity of growth that you need to measure now: two new stores opening and \$1 billion worth of U.S. real estate bought up every week; almost 600,000 American employees churned through in a year (that's at a 44 percent turnover rate). My thumbnail calculation suggests that by the year 4004, every square inch of the United States will be covered by supercenters, so that the only place for new supercenters will be on top of existing ones.

Wal-Mart will be in trouble long before that, of course, because with everyone on the planet working for the company or its suppliers, hardly anyone will be able to shop there. Wal-Mart is frequently lauded for bringing consumerism to the masses, but more than half of its own "associates," as the employees are euphemistically termed, cannot afford the company's health insurance, never mind its Faded Glory jeans. With hourly wages declining throughout the economy, Wal-Mart -- the nation's largest employer -- is already seeing its sales go soft.

In my own brief stint at the company in 2000, I worked with a woman for whom a \$7 Wal-Mart polo shirt, of the kind we had been ordered to wear, was an impossible dream: It took us an hour to earn that much. Some stores encourage their employees to apply for food stamps and welfare; many take second jobs. Critics point out that Wal-Mart has consumed \$1 billion in public subsidies, but that doesn't count the government expenditures required to keep its associates alive. Apparently the Wal-Martians, before landing, failed to check on the biological requirements for human life.

But a creature afflicted with the appetite of a starved hyena doesn't have time for niceties. Wal-Mart is facing class-action suits for sex discrimination and nonpayment for overtime work (meaning no payment at all), as well as accusations that employees have been locked into stores overnight, unable to get help even in

medical emergencies. These are the kinds of conditions we associate with third world sweatshops, and in fact Wal-Mart fails at least five out of 10 criteria set by the Worker Rights Consortium, which monitors universities' sources of logoed apparel -- making it the world's largest sweatshop.

Confronted with its crimes, the folks at the Bentonville headquarters whimper that the company has gotten too "decentralized" -- meaning out of control -- which has to be interpreted as a cry for help. But who is prepared to step forward and show Wal-Mart how to coexist with the people of its chosen planet? Certainly not the enablers, like George Will and National Review's Jay Nordlinger, who smear the company's critics as a "liberal intelligentsia" that favors Williams-Sonoma. (Disclosure: I prefer Costco, which pays decent wages, insures 90 percent of its employees and is reputedly run by native-born humans.)

No, Wal-Mart's only hope lies with its ostensible opponents, like Madeline Janis-Aparicio, who led the successful fight against a new superstore in Inglewood, Calif. "The point is not to destroy them," she told me, "but to make them accountable." Similarly Andy Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union, will soon begin a national effort to "bring Wal-Mart up to standards we can live with." He envisions a nationwide movement bringing together the unions, churches, community organizations and environmentalists who are already standing up to the company's recklessly metastatic growth.

Earth to Wal-Mars, or wherever you come from: Live with us or go back to the mother ship.

Thomas L. Friedman is on leave until October, writing a book.

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