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Wal-Mart as a “Wedge Issue”

by George C. Leef

The major political parties thrive on what are known as “wedge issues.” A wedge issue is one that takes advantage of the fact that many voters are motivated far more by emotion than by reason. It works at the gut level, driving people into anger first, and then into the voting booth, even though, when calmly analyzed, *there is no issue at all*. That is to say, the political handlers succeed in getting voters into a snorting, foot-stamping, rage over something that either is not really a problem, or, if it is a problem, something that government can’t or shouldn’t do anything about.

Wedge issues show political hucksterism at its finest, just like the old-time snake-oil salesmen who took advantage of people’s ignorance to get them to buy bottles of elixir that supposedly cured all ailments. Conservatives and liberals each make use of wedge issues. The former’s wedge issues tend to revolve around patriotism and the latter’s tend to revolve around “social justice.”

As the Democrats wrapped up their national convention last week, it became evident that one of their wedge issues is going to be that horrible blight on the American landscape, Wal-Mart. Demonizing Wal-Mart appeals greatly to high-brow liberal voters who are easily enraged over allegations of underpaid workers and “mom and pop” stores driven out of business. People who are innately suspicious of capitalism and probably harbor the notion that we’d be much better off in a centrally planned economic system are easily led around with stories about the evils of a successful business enterprise.

Senator Kerry, the Democratic nominee, has been denouncing the nation’s largest retailer for its low wages. He wants to legislate a raise in the minimum wage, but since most Wal-Mart employees earn more than even his proposed increase, maybe he would like to legislate a special Wal-Mart bill to compel it to pay workers ... enough. How much would be enough to satisfy the conscience of liberals is anyone’s guess.

Does it matter to Kerry that Wal-Mart is in a competitive market for labor and has to pay workers at least enough to induce them to work for it rather than for other businesses? Does it

dawn on Kerry that Wal-Mart pays at least as well as the “mom and pop” retailers do, if not better? Perhaps, but why give up a good bit of demagoguery over mere economic facts?

Then there is the foaming leftist writer Barbara Ehrenreich, who has been for a time given a weekly column in *The New York Times*. In her July 25 column, “Wal-Mars Invades Earth,” she really lets loose.

Complaining about the fact that working at Wal-Mart doesn’t pay very well, she says that “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.” Wal-Mart stores are bright, clean, safe places to work and seem to have no trouble attracting people who are content with its compensation, but Ehrenreich is upset that free-market transactions she doesn’t approve of occur between consenting adults.

Ehrenreich, who once took a job with a Wal-Mart for a few months to provide gripe material for her book *Nickel and Dimed*, insists that “these are the kinds of conditions we associate with third world sweatshops.” Of course, the typical Malaysian garment factory worker would switch places in an instant with a Wal-Mart employee if possible, just as most other workers in Malaysia would be glad to have such a “sweatshop” job rather than harvesting rice. Ehrenreich found the pay and conditions at Wal-Mart not to her liking, but so what? Why should all employment be to her liking any more than all movies or cars should be?

Ah, but wait. The indictment isn’t over. Wal-Mart has also been sued for sexual discrimination in hiring and for failing to pay overtime, Ehrenreich informs us. Even if those lawsuits had been adjudicated against the company (currently, they’re just lawsuits, and in our hyperregulated society conjuring up a lawsuit is as easy as pie), that still would not make Wal-Mart out as a villain. The percentage of Wal-Mart employees and managers who are women should be of no concern to federal government or anyone else. In a free society, there is no more reason to insist that an employer hire specific percentages of people of different categories than there would be to insist that, say, individuals read specific percentages of magazines in different categories. People are — or at least should be — free to decide on their own desired set of peaceful transactions without having to face penalties because some busybody didn’t like their choices.

As for overtime pay, the government should not regulate employment contracts. Instead of bringing in the murky “Fair Labor Standards Act” in an effort to find legal fault with the company, the only intelligent question to ask is whether Wal-Mart paid its workers as it agreed to. Maybe it did; maybe it didn’t. It’s really not crusade material.

Recently, a group of “activists” succeeded in preventing the construction of a new Wal-Mart store in Inglewood, California. Ehrenreich gushes her approval at the statement of a union president who said that he was going to begin a national effort to “bring Wal-Mart up to standards

we can live with.” What that actually means is “standards that keep Wal-Mart from successfully competing with local businesses.”

John Kerry, Barbara Ehrenreich, and millions of other Americans are meddlers who simply will not respect the freedom of others to live their lives and conduct their businesses as they see fit. Wal-Mart, so far as I’m aware, commits no acts of aggression in its operations. (Ehrenreich avers that the company takes public subsidies and if so, I happily say, get rid of all public subsidies. I doubt that she would be willing to shut off the governmental subsidy spigot, but if so, then we agree on something.) Its employment contracts are satisfactory to the only people who count — the workers who agree to them. Its sales are satisfactory to the only people who count — the customers. People who aren’t satisfied are free to walk away.

Wal-Mart hurts no one. There is no “issue” here; no threat to life, liberty, or property. But just like other successful companies and individuals who made targets of themselves simply because of their success — Michael Milken, Martha Stewart, Microsoft — Wal-Mart is now a target for our busybodies, meddlers, and parasites.

I don’t own Wal-Mart stock and hardly ever buy anything in its stores. So why do I care? Perhaps you’ve heard the saying, “First they came for the Jews, but I did nothing because I wasn’t Jewish ...”

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