

Is Black Friday edging out Thanksgiving?

By Bob Greene, CNN Contributor

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The debate over whether the hand-to-hand-combat excesses of Black Friday represent a grotesque over-commercialization of the holiday season has lost its meaning.

The point is no longer whether or not Black Friday tarnishes the holidays.

The point is that Black Friday has become a holiday of its own.

It will arrive again this week, even as Americans are still sitting at their Thanksgiving dinner tables. Black Friday -- with its door-buster sales, hordes of frenzied shoppers shoving for position, employees nervously waiting for the onslaught -- has shrugged off the confines of its name and has now established squatters' rights on Thursday.

Target stores will open at 9 p.m. Thanksgiving night, three hours earlier than the stores' midnight opening in 2011. Wal-Mart will begin its Black Friday sales at 8 p.m. on Thanksgiving. Toys R Us will match that 8 p.m. opening, as will Sears. Best Buy, which will wait until midnight to open its doors, seems almost like a dowdy throwback.

The store employees around the country who are upset that the schedules will deprive them of a big part of their holiday Thursday (many of them will have to arrive hours before the customers) and the citizens who fret that the lure of the deeply discounted sales will empty out their home-for-the-holidays family gatherings are probably fighting a losing battle. Black Friday appears to be triumphant, and it has taken on the characteristics of the holidays it mimics.

Like real holidays, it occurs on a predesignated day each year. People anticipate it and mark the date. Across the breadth of the nation they are absent from work to observe it. And when the day arrives, they congregate like... well, like congregations.

Established religious holidays, such as Christmas and Hanukkah, have long been occasions for gift-giving; some holidays -- Mother's Day, Father's Day, Valentine's Day -- have eagerly been embraced by merchants as a way to move their products.

Black Friday does away with the middleman -- in the universe of holidays, it is the only one that exists solely to sell merchandise. It celebrates nothing; it commemorates only itself. It is an annual festival of the cash register.

[News: Retail employess fight "Black Friday creep"](#)

The derivation of the term "Black Friday" is open to dispute, but it has come to refer to the theory that merchants go into the black -- into the profit side of the ledger -- during the holiday shopping season, which traditionally commences the day after Thanksgiving.

Certainly, and especially in this economy, anything that brings people into the stores is welcome. Brick-and-mortar stores can use the foot traffic as shopping goes increasingly online. And digital doors are open 24 hours a day, every day of the year.



Black Friday to start earlier AGAIN 02:08

But there is something about Black Friday -- in the pandemonium of its execution -- that is unsettling and cynical. The Wal-Mart employee who was trampled to death on Long Island in 2008 as shoppers knocked the doors from their hinges and stepped on him in their rush to the stacks of sales items, the woman in California last year who unleashed pepper spray on fellow shoppers vying for Xbox video game consoles. . .those kinds of scenes are becoming the iconic images of the long night.

Of course, the new holiday would not have taken hold if people weren't embracing it.

But you have to ask yourself: When people, as they grow older, remember the best holidays of their lives, is it some discounted gift that they recall with warmth and fondness? Some deal that they found? Or is it the family members and loved ones with whom they spent the holiday time?

Breaking up the flow of a real holiday so you can make it on time to the beginning of the Black Friday holiday seems a little misguided. It is one thing during the holiday season to be touched by the poignancy of long lines at soup kitchens and food pantries; it is quite another to witness throngs in the darkness bearing credit cards, waiting to stampede through stores in desperate and hungry-eyed pursuit of flat-screen TVs and Blu-Ray players.

At least earnest groups of neighborhood vocalists are not -- yet -- going door-to-door singing Black Friday carols.

But just give them time.