



SHOPPING TO SAVE AMERICA

While this week's *New York Times Sunday Magazine* cover story was navel gazing the meaning of life with "Is the Age of Affluence Over?" tens of thousands of New Yorkers, joined by perhaps just as many out-of-towners, were engaging in a new form of patriotism — shopping.

The incredibly warm, late November weather couldn't have come at a better time. For one stupendous weekend, it seemed as if the trouble of the world in general, and New York in particular, had been placed on hold.

Since September 11, New Yorkers have taken a serious hit to their collective psyches as well as their pocketbooks. Lives have been lost, and it may be years before New York fully recovers from the tragedy.

The last thing this city needs is a struggle with bad weather during the all-important holiday shopping season. So this year, Mother Nature cooperated, giving bad weather a holiday.

For visitors who have been given permission by their President to "shop 'til they drop," there is quite a generous supply of love and affection being heaped on this city.

The unusually large crowds making their way around Times Square and Rockefeller Center this particular weekend were reminiscent of a New Year's Eve blowout party. Thousands jockeyed for position to see the lighting of the famed Christmas tree and crowds were especially enthusiastic outside the Today Show studios.

Throngs of hungry shoppers pack mid-town restaurants and bars. Macy's and Bloomingdale's are elbow to elbow with consumers looking for post-September 11 bargains. Hotels are beginning to fill up and most of the Broadway shows are sold out. Even the intrepid Times Square street salesmen appear to be doing a brisk business, selling rather cheaply those expensive-looking watches and handbags.

Pleas from Mayor Rudolph Guiliani, and a clever celebrity ad campaign are paying off in spades. New York is attracting consumers by the busloads. Tour groups line up on Fifth Ave. with "I ♥ New York" stickers in their bus windows, coming from as far away as Pennsylvania, Indiana and Virginia.



Snapshots of patriotic symbolism are everywhere: babies in strollers displaying the American flag; an Indonesian Muslim cab driver with a small American flag adorning the dashboard; and the ubiquitous New York construction workers, with flags affixed squarely on their hardhats.

Even at Central Park's Strawberry Field memorial for fallen Beatles, someone has placed an American flag next to a picture of George Harrison. In Columbus Circle theater, moviegoers are doing their patriotic duty in shelling out \$9.50 to see "Behind Enemy Lines," the very real battle against terrorism is being waged in faraway Kandahar.

When called to action, Americans rally like no other nation. Social scientists theorize we westerners, while slow to rile, are tenacious fighters because the desire to protect our freedom is so strong.

During World War II, sacrifice was the watchword. But in a truly Seinfeldian way, now America is shopping to save the country. We are a nation of shoppers, not that there's anything wrong with that.

An era of sacrifice may be looming around the corner, but on this great and glorious late fall weekend in New York, Americans spirit are busy making up for lost time.

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