

Can't Walmart just go away?

By [Richard A. Kauffman](#)

August 24, 2012

Do you remember what the world was like before Walmart? Can you imagine a world without the retailer (again)?

My wife and I seldom shop at the Walmart in our town. (Occasionally one of our grandchildren will put something from there on a gift wish list.) However, when we're at our family's lake cottage, we shop regularly at Walmart—it's one of the only options in that area. Every time we walk into the place, one of us utters some misgivings about the experience.

The globalization represented by Walmart has helped developing countries economically. But it has also contributed to sweatshop conditions in many places around the world, conditions long since outlawed in this country. Out of sight, out of mind.

Walmart stores have also created jobs for many people in this country. But along with discriminating against women and offering few benefits, the jobs are poorly paid. Walmart is [one of the largest employers of minimum-wage workers](#), possibly the largest. Whenever a politician argues that the minimum wage should stay where it is or even be eliminated, think about the implications for Walmart workers. Of course, Walmart has been so successful in part because it plays to [an American "gospel" that mixes self-sacrifice with free enterprise](#), a gospel that many of its employees apparently buy into.

In the 2008 election, President Obama won a majority of women who have children at home and shop at Walmart at least once a month. This year, the "Walmart mom" vote is up for grabs. While in the past the company's political support in the past has largely gone to Republican interests, [in recent years](#) it has given to—and lobbied—both parties.

Walmart got its hold on the American market initially by going into blighted rural areas. Eventually they went into communities that were doing okay, which led to blighted downtowns all over America. Only recently have they begun to go into

some of the most blighted areas in the country, inner-city neighborhoods.

Are we better off with Walmart selling us cheap consumer goods, made in China or wherever? What if Walmart—and other big-box retailers like it—didn't exist? (Historians call questions like this “counterfactual history.”)

I can imagine a world without Walmart again. It will be a world with fewer consumer goods. The goods we can buy will be more expensive, better made, more durable and more essential. Less stuff will end up in landfills. And more of our products will be made in the good old U.S.A.

Go ahead, call me a dreamer.