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Merger Mania Devours Legendary Shopping Palaces

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Peer into the future for a minute.

Could it be that, 100 years from now, every American who has a job will be working at just one of two places: for the government, or for the one and only private corporation left in the country?

Right now, U.S. companies are merging like mad. Big corporate fish are being gobbled up by even bigger ones. Carry this to its logical conclusion, and one day there'll be only a single, incredibly enormous company left. One that does everything from laying carpet to making toothpaste to selling insurance to baking bread.

What inspired this vision was the announcement that a department store chain called Federated is buying the May Company's stores for \$11 billion. Federated and May already had a portfolio of old-line retailers like Macy's in New York and Marshall Field's in Chicago.

These once-regal independent department stores were the retail bedrock of every U.S. city. You could sample perfumes, take the escalator up to Lingerie or Men's Wear, gaze at the glittering Christmas displays, even meet people for lunch. Shopping there was an adventure.

But discount stores lured away bargain-hunting shoppers, and chic competitors with designer brands nibbled away the high-end customer base. That left the great landmark stores with an unpleasant choice: go discount, join forces with a rival store, or perish.

In a graphics shop somewhere no doubt, designers are creating signs for the most recently merged stores. So what would they read? Big, Incorporated?

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This summer, the U-S Supreme Court is expected to rule on two cases involving the public display of the biblical Ten Commandments. Christians, Jews, and Muslims believe that God gave Moses ten rules of behavior for mankind. Sometimes called the Decalogue, the commandments have been recorded and reprinted millions of times. But ever since God's laws showed up in U.S. public buildings, passions have been stirred, as they were in 2003, when an Alabama judge...

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From the moment Spaniards -- or was it Vikings? -- first dropped anchor and encountered the natives whom the Spanish called Indians (because they thought they had landed in India), the land now known as America has been a multicultural place. And of course it's much more so today. Just check out our faces and dialects and music. And our signs -- in English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, and more. Well, maybe it's Chinese. Mandarin Chinese characters,...