

Hypocrisy and right-wing politics fuel furor over Super Bowl episode

David Walsh
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The baring of pop singer Janet Jackson's breast during the halftime show at Sunday's Super Bowl football game has become the occasion for a vast and hypocritical outpouring of official moral outrage in the US. It has given rise to demands for further censoring the television airwaves and provided yet another opportunity for whipping up the Christian fundamentalist "base" of the Republican Party.

The guardians of American decency are up in arms, including National Football League (NFL) commissioner Paul Tagliabue, Federal Communications Commission (FCC) chairman Michael Powell, the religious right, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page and executives from corporate giants PepsiCo, America Online and CBS.

Tagliabue, who presides over a multi-billion dollar sport-business that more and more seems to recapture the spirit of Roman gladiatorial contests, called the MTV-produced halftime show "offensive, inappropriate and embarrassing to us and our fans. We will change our policy, our people and our processes for managing the halftime entertainment in the future." Before the game, the NFL commissioner posed on the sidelines for photographs with former president George Bush.

Powell—the son of Secretary of State Colin Powell, a Bush appointee as FCC chairman and an advocate of even more concentrated corporate ownership of the American media—declared: "Like millions of Americans, my family and I gathered around the television for a celebration. Instead, that celebration was tainted by a classless, crass and deplorable stunt." Powell promised an investigation of the episode. The FCC could fine CBS and its approximately 200 affiliates \$27,500 per station.

Right-wing "family groups" had a field day piously denouncing Jackson's nationally televised exposure. Focus on the Family's James C. Dobson noted that the FCC threat to "punish" CBS was encouraging, "but it is even more encouraging to see moms and dads rise up in defense of their sons and daughters to say 'Enough is enough.' That reaction, more than any government agency's action, has the greatest potential to clean up what passes for popular

entertainment these days." (This "rising up" has the usual character of such stage-managed affairs. Extreme right web sites and radio talk-show hosts call on their readers and listeners to bombard the corporation or government body in question with protests and the media obediently describes the "public outrage.")

The *Wall Street Journal's* editorial ("Viacom's Porn Channel") is so sex-obsessed that it raises questions all on its own. In a handful of paragraphs, the *Journal* editors refer with apparently considerable relish to "simulated masturbation," "simulated sex," "breast-baring incident," "scantily clad nymphettes," "casual sexual hookups," "triple-X stars" and "the daily sex diet [on MTV]." The editorial calls on the Viacom entertainment conglomerate (owner of CBS) to rein in its subsidiary, MTV, and fire the latter's president, Judy McGrath.

Executives at soft-drink manufacturer PepsiCo, who buy millions of dollars of advertising during the football championship game (this year such advertising cost \$76,666 *a second*), are threatening to pull out of next year's Super Bowl if they are not given assurances that there will be no repetition of the Jackson incident. PepsiCo spokesman Mark Dollins told the media, "We are very serious about this."

America Online (AOL) is demanding a \$7.5 million refund from Viacom after announcing plans to cancel its on-demand streaming of the halftime show. "Like the NFL," the Time Warner-owned firm said, "we were surprised and disappointed with certain elements of the show. In deference to our membership and fans, AOL and AOL.com will not be presenting the halftime show online as originally planned."

CBS chief Leslie Moonves, last seen in public suppressing the unflattering mini-series portrait of former president Ronald Reagan in response to a right-wing clamor, sent out a memo to employees: "I want to offer my personal assurances that we are looking into this matter and will do everything we can to get to the bottom of it."

One might be forgiven in the face of this moral effluvia for thinking that something quite atrocious had occurred on national television. In fact, a woman's breast was

uncovered. Worse things have happened, and even on American television.

No doubt the Jackson-Justin Timberlake number was tasteless, as was the entire Super Bowl program, as it has been every year. Interestingly, neither the *Journal* nor the Christian fundamentalists criticized the halftime performance by the talentless rapper Kid Rock, an avowed supporter of George W. Bush and the Iraq war, who “wrapped himself in an American flag, flanked by a pair of shapely women gyrating in halter-tops while waving the stars-and-stripes,” in a “crass pandering to patriotism,” noted a columnist for the *Buffalo News*.

Nor did they make mention of the patriotic display during the singing of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” when the 71,000 or so fans in attendance were asked to hold up placards of the American flag. Another highlight of the pre-game show was the planting of a US flag on a mock moon surface.

The drawing back in horror at the appearance of a naked breast is particularly hypocritical and odious. American professional football is increasingly violent, played at many positions by almost freakish human specimens. Its jargon consciously echoes that of the military: “blitz,” “bomb,” “the trenches,” “aerial assault,” “quick strike,” etc. The violence continues off the field. *Pros and Cons: The Criminals Who Play in the NFL* (1998) alleged that one in five NFL players during the 1996-97 season had been charged with a serious crime at one time or another.

(In more general terms, the National Coalition on Television Violence estimates that American children witness 8,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on television by the time they finish elementary school.)

The ritualized violence in pro football is accompanied by fetishized sexuality. Scantly-clad cheerleaders are a fixture at NFL games. Ian O’Connor in *USA Today* points out, “The NFL’s beer sponsor, Coors Light, spent the postseason blitzing viewers with yet another mindless commercial featuring buxom barmaids and cheerleaders, an ad hardening the notion that women who dare to step inside America’s testosterone-crazed football culture are to be seen exclusively as sexual playthings. ... Last year Miller Lite’s ‘Tastes-Great, Less-Filling’ mud wrestlers were paraded around the Super Bowl as if they were the game’s official hostesses.”

The entire professional football experience in the US is increasingly debased. It has less and less to do with “play,” and more and more to do with distracting a discontented and alienated population, providing it with vicarious thrills and encouraging its very worst instincts.

The general political and social context in which the breast-baring episode takes place makes it all the more obscene.

Outraged by Janet Jackson’s fleeting partial nudity, the American political and media establishment has no difficulty accepting as “par for the course” the looting of the national economy—to the tune of trillions of dollars—by corporate criminals with the closest connections to the Bush administration, and the launching of a war in Iraq, which has already killed and maimed tens of thousands, on the basis of outright lies. There is something extraordinarily sick about this state of affairs.

The outcome of the Super Bowl incident will no doubt be even greater pressure on the television networks to avoid controversy, produce bland “family fare” and more strictly adhere to the official line in every way.

CBS executives have already promised that there will be no repeat of the Jackson unveiling or any other untoward occurrence at the Grammy Awards February 8. The network has long used a five-second delay to cut audio from the “live broadcast.” It will lengthen this delay and introduce new technology making possible split-second video editing. This creates the possibility of entirely eliminating unwanted interventions of all types at so-called “live” events.

CBS and the other television networks are being called to order at a time of increasing political volatility and flux. The FCC investigation of the Super Bowl stunt will no doubt provide a new forum in which to discipline and intimidate the entertainment industry. For the Bush administration and the extreme right, the supposed need to protect the American family from “smut” on television will merely be one of the useful pretexts for the generalized assault on free speech and democratic rights.

It is worth noting that CBS, in a direct violation of democratic rights, refused to air a 30-second spot during the Super Bowl from the liberal MoveOn Voter Fund critical of the Bush administration’s economic policies, on the grounds that it rejects all such controversial advertising. Viacom, a private corporation, thereby determined what millions of Americans could or could not see.



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