

The Super Bowl super-spreader

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5 February 2021

With the death toll in the COVID-19 pandemic approaching half a million in the US, the holding of the National Football League (NFL) Super Bowl championship game this Sunday between the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Kansas City Chiefs and its manufactured “festive” atmosphere are grotesquely and staggeringly inappropriate.

One would be hard pressed to exaggerate the callousness of the organizers of this event, with its attendant inanities and pre-packaged “Super Bowl Experience.” The NFL website suggests, “While things will look a little different this year, we’re committed to delivering the ultimate fan experience in the safest way possible.”

The pretense that things are merely “a little different,” along with the apparent hope that the population will forget the country is in the midst of social tragedy without precedent, tells one more about the character of the NFL owners and corporate America in general than anything else.

By any rational standard that takes public health into account, the game should not be held at all. Raymond James Stadium in Tampa Bay, which ordinarily seats 65,000 spectators, will still have 25,000 people in the stands. The crowd Sunday will include some 7,500 vaccinated health care workers provided free tickets by the NFL. The tickets are intended as a thank you gift. The best way by far to reward such workers would be to cancel the unnecessary and hazardous event.

Stephen Kissler, an epidemiologist at Harvard University, told CNBC, “My biggest concern for when COVID-19 might spread at the stadium is not necessarily when people are sitting in their seats... It’s actually when they are mixing in other parts of the stadium.”

Not only are the 25,000 fans in danger of contracting a lethal virus, along with the players, coaches, staff and stadium employees, and all those with whom they come into contact during their travels, but the event will spawn thousands of parties across the country (and, indeed, internationally) that will also no doubt lead to further illness and misery. This has been the outcome of every major holiday or special event that has occurred over the course of the pandemic so far.

The American ruling elite has strongly compelling reasons to push ahead with staging the game. The Super Bowl has become part of the official American social calendar. Each year tens of millions of people are urged to participate in this supposed moment of national togetherness, with all and sundry expected

to be dutifully glued to his or her television or some other device.

Unfailingly, the event has a blatantly patriotic and military coloration. This year, no doubt, those in attendance and the viewing public will be called on (briefly) to recognize the victims of COVID-19, while it is strongly suggested that the greatest possible tribute to the dead would be “to get on with life.”

Moreover, in the context of the shaky first days of a new administration, portions of the media are framing Sunday evening’s game, symbolically at least, as something of a new point of departure for the US, a moment of renewal that includes, of course, the reckless and homicidal reopening of businesses and schools across the board.

At the crude “filthy lucre” level, hundreds of millions of dollars are involved in organizing the Super Bowl. The half-time show, the advertisements (a thirty-second spot costs approximately \$5.5 million), the general hoopla, everything here is directed toward generating profits for the NFL, its various team ownerships and corporate sponsors and businesses in the host city.

The league and its propagandists, often as a means of encouraging the construction of expensive new stadiums, claim the event is worth \$300 million to \$500 million to such cities. Critics assert that the Super Bowl brings in nowhere near that amount, and taxpayers end up holding the bag.

It is painfully ironic that this year’s Super Bowl is being played in Florida, one of the epicenters of the coronavirus. More people have died from the disease in this state, nearly 28,000 (the fourth largest total after New York, California and Texas), than will be seated in the arena on Sunday. Florida’s governor, Ron DeSantis, a vile ally of Donald Trump, has pursued a relentless policy of ignoring the health of the population and serving corporate interests.

In December, for example, the *Washington Post* termed DeSantis’s policies a “catastrophe.” From the onset of the pandemic, the governor, the *Post* observed, “has conveniently, even diabolically, airbrushed covid-19 out of public life here. The result: 1.2 million total covid-19 cases, nearly 61,000 total hospitalizations and a new seven-day case-positivity rate of 9.7 percent—all rapidly rising toward crisis levels.” The Florida state government has been one of the most aggressive in threatening teachers and re-opening its school system, with the

result that dozens of teachers have died.

The ruthless and essentially criminal manner in which the American ruling class operates should come as no surprise whatsoever. However, there is also the matter of the popular response to and participation in events such as the Super Bowl, and here one has to speak certain harsh truths.

The year-long quarantine or semi-quarantine has no doubt trapped people and made life difficult, even emotionally desperate, for millions. There is a natural desire to break out of the confinement. Science and reason, and even elementary common sense, nonetheless dictate a more considered approach to life, thinking of the long-term good and the physical safety of oneself and of others.

Aspects of American life, culture and history work against such far-sightedness. The emphasis on immediate gain without thought to its consequences, the pragmatic inclination against theoretical and concentrated thought, the suspicion that a concern with history (in Henry Ford's infamous phrase) might well be "more or less bunk," none of this helps the population in the present crisis-ridden conditions.

More concretely, the long ago stultification and neutering of the labor movement, its adoption of the established religion of anti-communism, have contributed to the thorough-going unpreparedness of the American people for the pandemic and other disasters prepared by capitalism, including the January 6 coup.

Would anyone even think of inquiring about the AFL-CIO's policy toward the COVID-19 tragedy? Appropriately, the union federation's website does nothing but pass on federal government agencies' information, or misinformation, about the pandemic, all of which takes for granted workers remaining on the job.

Union officials have acted as nothing more than the well-compensated herders of humanity into potentially deadly factories, hospitals, schools, warehouses and offices. For this alone, as Rosa Luxemburg observed about the German trade unions' role in World War I, they "deserve to perish ten times over."

Sports itself takes up far more space and time in American life than is healthy, a phenomenon bound up with the political, social and moral vacuum at the center of the society. An obsession with events like the Super Bowl is more likely to develop in a country in which the working class is entirely excluded as an independent force from political life and debate.

Nor should the "bread and circuses" feature of the championship football game and similar events be ignored. The need to divert and dull the public's attention, through scandal, foreign wars and domestic spectacle, is very real. The worse and more ominous things get, the more the powers that be turn to such means.

Perhaps most insidiously of all, the ruling class has set out on a definite course of inuring the population to illness and death. More than 3,000 a day are dying from COVID-19. The media,

by and large, has dropped reference to such figures. Images of the dead, as during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, are entirely absent, in the name of respecting the privacy of the families of the deceased. A significant portion of the American people, and other peoples, is simply being discreetly disposed of, as in some paranoid science fiction nightmare. The awful reality is sanitized, kept from public view and discussion, even "normalized."

Decades-long cultural processes have fed into this. In the 1980s, the worship of Wall Street and greed truly took hold of considerable sections of the upper-middle class, with the disgusting, slavish reverence for the "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" and everything that went with it. The American mass media became increasingly oriented to the wealthy, to celebrity and to glamorous youth. Millions of people who faced the closure of entire industries and the loss of decent-paying jobs, declining living standards, homelessness and poverty, descended into the category of "those who don't count" in America.

Why should the oligarchs, the corporate CEOs, the business press be expected to shed any tears for the hundreds of thousands of often older and poorer men and women who have succumbed in the pandemic, whose deaths result in considerable savings for government programs and corporate pension plans?

But the working class needs to be supremely sensitive to such cruelty, the sort of inhumanity that ultimately legitimizes the construction of concentration camps for the disposal of the "sub-human," and actively oppose it.

If the powers that be imagine that events such as this, in the final analysis, will distract people from the ongoing disaster, they are deluding themselves. Millions may still watch it, but the Super Bowl is not the responsibility of the American people, it is not their mess nor their disgrace. This belongs to the people on top. The effort to blot out the reality of half a million dead is the work of America's rulers in all their backwardness, criminality and blindness.

What more and more dominates the working population is a mood of anger and disgust, a growing recognition that something is terribly wrong with this society, one that stages Super Bowl parties and "halftime extravaganzas" on the graves of its victims. Wider and wider layers sense that American society, down to its foundations, is crumbling and cannot be repaired. The road is being cleared for the rejection of capitalism on a mass scale.



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