

Super Bowl LVII: Money, militarism, spectacle ... and football

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Super Bowl LVII was played at State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Arizona on Sunday evening before a crowd of more than 67,000 and a worldwide television audience estimated at 113 million viewers.

The National Football League (NFL) game between the Kansas City Chiefs and Philadelphia Eagles—in which the Chiefs emerged as NFL champions in a 38-35 comeback win by means of a field goal with seconds to go—took place amid an orgy of commercialism, gambling, nationalism and militarism that arguably eclipsed all previous Super Bowls.

The annual Super Bowl is the world's most expensive and most inflated sports entertainment spectacle. Even though the FIFA World Cup, which takes place every four years, has a larger global audience—more than one billion viewers—it lags behind the Super Bowl in both the scale of production and the amount of money involved.

According to the latest available figures, from 2021, the NFL team owners generated a combined \$17.1 billion from 272 games played between 32 teams over 24 weeks, starting in early September and ending on Super Bowl Sunday in early February. By comparison, the 2022 FIFA World Cup, held in Qatar, generated an income of \$7.5 billion from 64 games played between 32 teams over 29 days in November and December.

Average ticket prices for the Super Bowl were above \$5,000, while tickets for the final game of the World Cup sold for \$1,000.

However, as the 2022 figures show, the FIFA competition is gaining ground on the NFL, and this is a matter of concern for the NFL team owners and their elite associates in the US financial and political establishment.

After noting that FIFA generates more money per game than the NFL, the Madrid-based daily sports

newspaper *Dario AS* wrote on Saturday: “The playoffs leading up to the Super Bowl and the event itself, however, attract a massive audience on a yearly basis, and the recent efforts to bring the NFL to Europe and Mexico have inevitably grown the sports’ international market.”

Besides money-making, the Super Bowl functions as a spectacle to divert the social and political energy of the public into an event filled with continuous images and messages promoting capitalism, American nationalism, militarism and various forms of cultural backwardness.

On this question, this year's event was notable for the absence of direct references to the multiple crises of capitalist society, especially in the advertising. With 30-second spots going for \$7 million each, as pointed out by the Associated Press, “Advertisers bet big that viewers were turning to the Super Bowl for a comforting escape and delivered a series of advertisements that relied on familiar celebrity faces, light humor, and plenty of cuddly dogs.

“This wasn't a year for edgy humor or experimentation. After the global pandemic, with economic uncertainty looming ahead and the war in Ukraine stretching on, advertisers just wanted people to feel good.”

While the Arizona county of Maricopa, where the State Farm Stadium is located, has issued public health warnings about the rise of COVID-19, flu and RSV cases in the weeks leading up to the big game, the entire corporate and media establishment made a commitment not to mention any of it during the festivities. Parties were held before, during and after the game as super-spreader events, not to mention the largely unmasked crowd at the game itself.

In a sign of growing recognition within the ruling

class of the unpopularity of the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, there were no images of blue and yellow flags or mention of the rapidly escalating conflict during the Fox Sports broadcast.

On the other hand, the Super Bowl ads included two spots worth a total of \$20 million from a Michigan-based advertising agency campaign called “He Gets Us,” which, according to the agency founder, aims to “raise the respect and relevancy of Jesus” in the United States. A group of 75 anonymous, wealthy donors—which includes Hobby Lobby CEO David Green—have contributed \$300 million to the agency to develop the campaign.

The pregame program on Fox Sports included a stream of profiles, sounds and images that promoted the US military. A replay of the patriotic Johnny Cash spoken-word song from 1974, “The Ragged Old Flag,” was followed by a lying presentation about the life of Pat Tillman, the former NFL player who enlisted in 2002 and died from friendly fire in Afghanistan.

The spot promoting the Pat Tillman Foundation, which raises funds for academic scholarships awarded to military service members, veterans and their spouses, never mentioned the athlete’s opposition to the invasion of Iraq or his family’s opposition to the false use of his life and death to promote the US military.

Of course, the pregame proceedings included the spreading of a large American flag on the field and a flyover of State Farm Stadium by four US Navy fighter jets.

The musical selections included a very good rendition of the “Star Spangled Banner” by country singer-songwriter Chris Stapleton, an excellent performance of “America the Beautiful” with acoustic guitar by Grammy Award-winning musician Babyface, and a moving interpretation of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” often referred to as “The Black National Anthem,” by the actress Sheryl Lee Ralph.

The half-time show, sponsored by Apple for \$50 million and seen by some viewers as more important than the football game, featured the internationally popular Rihanna, currently the wealthiest musician in the world, with an estimated net worth of \$1.4 billion. In 2019, Rihanna turned down an offer to perform at Super Bowl half-time in a show of solidarity with Colin Kaepernick, who had been blacklisted by the NFL owners for taking a knee during the national anthem.

Although she offered no public explanation for her rapprochement with the NFL—after she had said she “couldn’t dare” perform and “couldn’t be a sellout”—it appears that the signing of a multi-year deal with Jay-Z and his Rock Nation agency for the production of the half-time shows with black talent was enough to get Rihanna to change her mind.

Throughout the lead-up to the game, there was an undercurrent of “woke” politics and racial matters being injected into the commentary by the corporate media. Uppermost was the promotion of the fact that the game featured two quarterbacks—Jalen Hurts for the Eagles and Patrick Mahomes for the Chiefs—who are both black, the first time such a circumstance had occurred in a Super Bowl.

A particularly disgusting example of the race view of sports and society as a whole was provided in an opinion column by Mike Freeman of *USA Today*, titled “Super Bowl 57 is the Blackest, most woke Super Bowl ever. Sorry haters!” Freeman wrote: “At this point we had the Black national anthem, Rihanna performing and two Black starting quarterbacks for the first time ever. During Black History Month. This wasn’t the Super Bowl. This was Wakanda.

“But wait, it gets woker. The traditional flyover before the game was performed by an all-women pilot team, the first time ever. Wokity wokity woke.”

Within this commentary, readers will not find a single criticism of the vast social inequality on display at the Super Bowl, transcending racial identity and reflecting the fundamental economic question of class. It was not lost on the viewing audience, for example, that billionaire Tesla CEO Elon Musk was captured during the broadcast sitting with billionaire Fox Corporation CEO Rupert Murdoch.

One can be certain that the life to which the vast majority of TV viewers returned on Monday morning is very different from that of the oligarchs who benefited from all the money that was made in Glendale, Arizona.



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