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Super Bowl 2022—A spectacle of money-making and nationalism in the midst of mass death

The 2022 Super Bowl in Los Angeles, like last year's in Tampa, was a mass superspreader event, held in complete disregard of public health. It brought 70,000 people together, with little or no masking, as well as countless watch parties held in communities large and small. There is no way to measure the number of coronavirus infections that will arise from this single day, but last week, with no Super Bowl, an estimated 1.1 million Americans were infected with the potentially lethal virus, and 16,000 died.



The Cincinnati Bengals kick the opening kick-off to the Los Angeles Rams during the NFL Super Bowl 56 football game Sunday, Feb. 13, 2022, in Inglewood, Calif. (AP Photo/Adam Hunger)

Epidemiologist Ellie Murray tweeted Sunday before the event, “The crowd at the Super Bowl tonight will be roughly the same size as the number of people who died from COVID in the US in the *last month*” (her emphasis). Dr. Murray gave an interview to the *World Socialist Web Site* last week in which she exposed the official claims that COVID-19 has become “endemic,” part of an effort to mislead the public and justify the full reopening of schools and business operations.

In 2021, the National Football League was compelled to limit the number attending the Super Bowl to 25,000, less than half the capacity of the stadium in which the game was played, as well as inviting thousands of health care workers who were given free tickets to acknowledge their efforts as the “front line” against the pandemic. At the time, the COVID-19 death toll in the United States had just reached 400,000.

In 2022, all such pretenses of concern over the pandemic have been abandoned, even though the US death toll has hit 944,000 and will likely reach a million sometime next month. SoFi Stadium, located in Inglewood in Los Angeles County, was packed to capacity with 70,000 in attendance. There was barely a mask in sight, either in the huge crowd, or among the players and others on the field. In the ceremonies, hoopla and endless media reporting, as well as in the broadcast of the game itself, there was no mention of the colossal impact of COVID-19, the death toll, or the ongoing effective collapse of the US health care system, amid overwhelmed hospitals and a workforce decimated by the virus they have been trying to fight.

This comes after a season in which 18 million people have attended NFL games in at least 32 cities. Attendance was 1 percent higher than in 2019, the last pre-pandemic season, and total attendance was increased by nearly 1 million by adding a 17th game to the regular season schedule—a significant boost in profits for the billionaire team owners.

There was no reference even to the impact of the pandemic on the NFL players themselves. Hundreds of players had to sit out games because of testing positive for the virus, until the league suspended its quarantine rules to insure that its post-season playoff

schedule leading up to the Super Bowl was not endangered. Games and television revenues are more important than health and human life.

This is the first time that a Super Bowl and the Olympic games have overlapped, and there is a stark contrast. Held in a protective social/health care bubble, the Beijing Olympics are probably the safest place on the planet for an athlete to be. There have been scattered cases of COVID-19 in the Olympic Village, but these have been quickly isolated. Most days the number has been in single digits, and occasionally even zero. For China as a whole, there have been only four deaths since April 17, 2020. Over the same period, COVID has killed more than 900,000 people in the United States.

The health precautions of the Chinese government have been vilified by the Western media as repressive, even as they have proven effective and no obstacle to the Olympic competition. There are many economic and strategic drivers of the decade-long imperialist campaign against China, but the fear that their own population will see the success of China's Zero COVID policy in protecting the health and lives of millions of people has surely become a factor.

As part of the overall campaign of the US ruling elite to promote the "big lie" that the pandemic is over, professional football has fully returned to its normal functions, generating fabulous profits for corporate America, particularly the owners, mostly billionaires, and celebrating the nationalism, brutality and violence that are inseparable features of American society and of American militarism, in particular.

The National Football League is the most lucrative television franchise, with games broadcast over three networks and countless cable, digital and streaming applications, in an 11-year contract renewed early last year for \$110 billion. With \$10 billion a year in revenue divided up among the 32 teams, "The media money rolling in is so vast that every NFL team turns a profit even before it turns on the lights," the *New YorkTimes* noted.

For the networks, the price of the games is apparently a bargain. According to an analysis by the *Times*, "The majority of TV's top 100 most-viewed programs each year are football games," while the Super Bowl itself is invariably the most-watched program of the year, with an audience of more than 100 million. NBC, which broadcast the game this year,

charged an average of \$6.5 million for a 30-second commercial. The 90 or so commercials during the actual game broadcast will net it more than \$600 million.

The billionaire owner of the Los Angeles Rams, the Super Bowl winners, is E. Stanley Kroenke, a real estate and sports mogul worth an estimated \$10 billion. He built his fortune in tandem with his marriage to Ann Walton, daughter of the founder of Wal-Mart and herself a billionaire many times over. Kroenke is the ninth largest landowner in the United States, with nearly a million acres, much of it ranch and farmland, as well as urban real estate developments. He or his wife also own the Denver Nuggets basketball team, the Colorado Avalanche hockey team and other franchises in lesser professional sports.

SoFi Stadium, where the Rams became the second team to host the Super Bowl and win it, is a \$5 billion sports palace built in an area with the largest population of homeless people in North America, some 66,000 in the last pre-COVID-19 census, a figure now estimated at well over 100,000. In the weeks before the game, the state agency CalTrans systematically cleared out homeless encampments around the stadium to improve the “experience” of the well-heeled fans attending the games, who paid between \$1,000 and \$6,200 (cover price) and up to \$10,000 on the resale market. Encampments near the stadium that could not be seen from the highways were left alone, according to an NBC report, demonstrating the Potemkin Village character of the removals.

One additional money-making aspect is new to the 2022 Super Bowl: gambling revenue. A 2018 US Supreme Court decision cleared the way for legalized sports betting outside Nevada, and 30 states have now permitted it. The NFL moved the Oakland Raiders to Las Vegas, Nevada, the home of legalized sports betting, and it has now allowed gambling sites to sponsor teams and advertise during games. Several NFL owners are prominent investors in sports betting. Revenue from apps like FanDuel and DraftKings is rising at double- and triple-digit rates, and the industry projected that nearly \$8 billion would be wagered on the 2022 Super Bowl. The social cost in terms of promoting gambling addiction cannot be exaggerated, particularly in a society where upward mobility has virtually ceased, and many millions view “winning” the lottery or other forms of gambling as their only hope of advancing.

Finally there is the element of conformity and the promotion of nationalism and reverence for all forms of authority, particularly the police. As is now usual in professional sports, there was a flyover of SoFi Stadium by Air Force jets before the game.

The music program at half-time was devoted entirely to hip hop, showing that this genre has lost any oppositional, let alone radical, flavor. There was a mini-controversy over demands by the NFL that certain anti-police lines be deleted from songs. Dr. Dre, who oversaw the entire program, refused, and sang his line, “still not loving police.” Kendrick Lamar did not sing the line, “We hate po-po,” slang for “we hate the police.” He had previously dropped that line during a performance at the White House for Barack Obama. Eminem took a knee during one song, apparently in tribute to Colin Kaepernick, the star quarterback blacklisted by the NFL owners for his protests against police violence, when he knelt during the singing of the national anthem before games.

This all had, however, a very mild and for-the-record character, and none of the songs had any genuinely critical approach to American society. Here racial and identity politics play an enormous role. Four of the five main performers were black, as is The Rock, who introduced the two teams. Mickey Guyton, one of a handful of black women prominent in country music, sang the national anthem. Mike Tirico, also African American, hosted the awarding of the Vince Lombardi Trophy to the winning Rams. The few references to social injustice were presented entirely in racial terms.

There is an additional and obvious reason for the lack of any social “edge” to the program. The net worth of the five main performers at half-time, Dr. Dre, Lamar, Snoop Dogg, Eminem and Mary J. Blige, is just short of \$1 billion, with Dr. Dre alone worth \$500 million. The event was produced by Jay-Z, the billionaire hip hop performer turned entertainment mogul, who signed a contract with the NFL to handle all its musical productions shortly after the Kaepernick controversy erupted.

There is musical talent here, but it is largely overshadowed by the poisonous influence of wealth and celebrity. The performers at the Super Bowl half-time show are unpaid, one reason why the program has generally featured pop artists who have already made huge sums of money but are past the peak of their careers and want to remind a vast audience that they are still extant. This year, Dr. Dre actually paid the bulk of the program costs, \$7 million, out of his own pocket, and in return, was paid effusive tribute by the other

performers. The NFL, for its part, concerned about the welfare of its “brand,” wanted only the blandest and most inoffensive offerings. They had nothing to worry about.

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