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## The Super Bowl and Conspicuous Consumption

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ESPN is calling it their "blow out the budget coverage." FOX promises that this will be the biggest presentation ever with over seven hours of pre-game programming. A thirty-second advertising spot will cost a \$1.6M which comes to a mere \$53,333 per second and represents a 28% increase over last year's bargain rates.

With all this talk of money and excess it could only be the Super Bowl, the American version of the mid-winter festival of light, where the light comes not from the sun but from the glitter of gold.

Like those who worship the sun, Americans who worship football, money and excess take this opportunity in dead of winter to pay tribute to the notion that sheer waste is the highest form of display. Thorstein Veblen would love this validation of his theories explaining the behavior of the leisure classes. The only major difference is that by the end of the 20th century the leisured classes have grown to become the leisured society.

Veblen described the styles of conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure and conspicuous waste as the means by which the leisured classes display their wealth to one another and to the lesser beings in their society. In the late 20th century with the maturing of the Super Bowl into a national holiday, the upper classes display their wealth to one another while American society at large displays its wealth to the world.

On a planet plagued by collapsed and collapsing economies, the ravages of war and malnutrition, and the human struggle for survival, Americans this weekend will launch into levels of consumption that challenge the boundaries of the merely vulgar and obscene.

FOX had little problem selling its commercial spots for the Super Bowl game telecast at a total of some \$93M and when you add the pre- and post-game commercial sales the total reaches \$150M. This of course is only the cost of running the commercials which cost millions and millions more to produce. Production values are high because the audience is so large as seven percent of that audience is said to tune in only to watch the commercials.

But wait there's more. It seems that the Anheuser-Busch brewing company paid \$2M per thirty seconds to guarantee exclusivity of commercials in the beer category. No other beer company will be allowed to buy commercial time for the telecast. Anheuser-Busch will run nine spots totally five minutes and fifteen seconds. That would be a total of \$21M for the package plus production costs.

The beer peddlers will tell you that it is worth every million as the Super Bowl does so well what television is designed to do; bring millions of people together to sell them something. The beauty of the Super Bowl is that it brings together not just a huge audience but one that is top heavy with prime age beer drinkers.

Some of the action has also moved to the World Wide Web where the 11th Annual Bud Bowl (that should be Bud Bowl XI) will be staged. The struggle this year will be at [www.budbowl.com](http://www.budbowl.com) keeping with the technological trends of our time. It will take place at halftime as part of a giveaway of electronics items. And if you are so inclined you bet on this game in Vegas. Astonishingly there is a line on Bud versus Bud-Light.

Merchandise sales is another area of enormous lower level consumer mania. Genesis Direct of New Jersey a national distributor of team merchandise is reporting that Bronco sales are going through the roof topping any of their previous Super Bowl appearances. That odd form of merchandise called "collectibles" featuring Terrell Davis and John Elway are very hot items.

The signed Bronco jerseys of these two stars sell for \$450. An Elway signed helmet goes for \$325 while one signed by Davis is \$225. Five thousand dollars will bring you a lithograph print of the Bronco team photo. A Super Bowl XXXIII football signed by Elway is only \$325.

All of this merchandise as well as that for the Atlanta Falcons is readily available at any number of web sites, along with all manner of Super Bowl merchandise. Americans will spend millions of dollars during this festival for such items. Joy Athletic of Palm Beach projects the sale of \$3M worth of Super Bowl shirts during this week.

Where there were only a few web sites three years ago, now there is an endless supply of them. If you started surfing today you would be hard pressed to visit all the Super Bowl sites by the

end of the millennium. Every major and minor television and radio web site has at least one Super Bowl page. Any search engine will put you in touch with a wide range of sites designed for fans of varying philosophical and religious persuasions.

The Reggie White Christian Super Bowl Web page is still one of my all-time favorites coming as it does with pre-game, half-time, and post-game prayer service suggestions. It appears that Reggie's godly location has not been updated since 1997 but then how much do Super Bowl prayers change each year anyway?

Nothing matches the excesses that we are not allowed to see inside those corporate tents, in the corporate suites, and on board the corporate yachts anchored in Biscayne Bay. Schmoozing is taken to new levels as clients are entertained, executives are rewarded for their hard work, and politicians are oiled for future use. For those who prefer terra firma the attractions of South Beach will more than sate the wide variety of human appetites.

Some 200 corporations will take part in the Super Bowl celebration in some way. The large ones will fly in hundreds of employees and spent up to \$5M. Smaller companies will wine and dine clients at five-figure costs. NFL Properties has reserved 3,000 hotel rooms, and those rooms are at premium rates. There will be thirty-five corporate tents set up in Miami near the stadium. When this practice began in 1984 there were 12 tents in Tampa. The excess just keeps on growing.

It is truly a great day; a tribute to American life at the end of this millennium; a notice given to the rest of the world about who has the wealth and who aims to keep it. An invitation to all to share vicariously in the pleasures of imperial decadence at the end of the American Century.

Thorstein Veblen, we salute you!

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