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Super Bowl: Corporate Excess and Roman Numerals

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It's that time of year once again. One of America's premier sporting events is about to take place. The one which identifies itself using Roman Numerals. It is less than forty-eight hours from Super Sunday, and there probably hasn't been this much Yankee pillaging in Atlanta since Sherman's troops were in town 130 years ago.

There are those who would say that any event using Roman Numerals to identify itself is being a bit pretentious. But those people don't understand how important this event really is. They don't understand the historical origins of Super Sunday, and its long running association with the sacred and profane in American culture.

First there is the fact that the Super Bowl was the creation of the first great emperor of the NFL in the Imperial Age, the Caesar Augustus of professional football, Pete Rozelle. Over the years Rozelle managed to consolidate his imperial power, and in fact with the help of Brent Mussenberger and those at CBS, turned himself into a minor deity. One of the high points of past Super Bowl's was the three minutes in which Rozelle consented to be interviewed by Mussenberger on national television. It was like someone interviewing God.

Second, it must be remembered that the Super Bowl has been adopted by American middle class males, and assorted other folks, as a mid-winter ritual of pleasure in the midst of frozen bleakness. The bonding of middle level executive types has never had a more perfect setting.

Third, it has become an event that no normal football fan or even most season ticket holders can afford to attend. The NFL boasted a few years ago that 25% of those who attended the game owned their own businesses. Nearly all the tickets go to NFL executives, Sponsor executives, high government officials, and their clients and sycophants. Few ordinary fans attend. The game in fact is no longer of any real significance, except as a means to sell commercial television time at obscene rates. Last year the figure was \$850,000 per thirty second spot.

Finally it is a festival of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste on a scale never even dreamed of by Thorstein Veblen, the economist who invented those terms to describe the rich in America nearly 100 years ago. It is an occasion for

display and decadence, and a week in which Atlanta's prostitutes, pimps, and bookies will experience a gold rush.

To suggest that Roman numerals are not appropriate, is to fail to understand the significance of bread and circuses in the late 20th century. Super Bowl week has become legendary for its circuses. The Commissioner's party in the Imperial Age of Pete Rozelle became one of the biggest and most opulent. After a modest beginning it quickly outgrew the capacity of any mere hotel ballroom. This has led to some magnificent venues for the event. Before Super Bowl VII in L.A. the party was held aboard the Queen Mary. Before Super Bowl VIII in Houston, the party was held on the floor of the Astrodome. A giant barbecue, with pigs roasting on spits, dotted the floor of the facility, while Miami has hosted Commissioner's parties at Hialeah Racetrack and Miami Airport's International Terminal just before it opened. For that venue the NFL hired 600 musicians from 14 Caribbean nations to entertain.

Corporate parties provide another level of conspicuous waste and austentation. The Ford Motor Company has consistently used the Super Bowl as an incentive for its salespeople, spending \$1M to bring in dealers to Super Bowl XIX, where Gladys Knight and Neal Sedaka entertained. Nissan spent \$2M at Super Bowl XVIII in Tampa on a five-day Caribbean cruise, while 800 private jets were cleared for landing in the Bay area that weekend. In San Diego for Super Bowl XXII 2000 limmos were in use, and many headed for the party that featured Frank and Lisa in concert.

Unfortunately the television coverage of this sort of thing has been in decline in recent years. We need a return to the good old days when CBS sent Phyllis George out to schmooze with the rich, and report on the extravagant tail-gate parties and the activities at the more exclusive watering holes. We really have a right to see this, as it represents our tax dollars at work, with corporations and business executives using these spending binges as a tax write-off.

And if there is any further doubt that this event is worthy of Roman numerals contemplate these numbers. Last year the Super Bowl was shown in 100 countries across the world and nine out of ten of the most watched television shows of all time were Super Bowls. And it is estimated that in excess of \$250B will be waged on the Super Bowl both legally and illegally. Las Vegas alone will handle over \$50M in action.

Hail Caesar! It's time for Super Bowl XXVIII.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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