

# American Culture Seen through the Super Bowl

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Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2019

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:142:407411>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-07-17**



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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i  
pedagogije

Kristina Smažil

**Američka kultura viđena kroz Super Bowl**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

Osijek, 2019.

Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku  
Filozofski fakultet Osijek  
Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost

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Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti

Znanstveno polje: filologija

Znanstvena grana: anglistika

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

Osijek, 2019.

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek  
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Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and  
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**American Culture Seen through the Super Bowl**

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Jadranka Zlomislić, Assistant Professor

Osijek, 2019

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Pedagogy

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Bachelor's Thesis

Scientific area: humanities

Scientific field: philology

Scientific branch: English studies

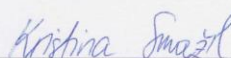
Supervisor: Dr. Jadranka Zlomislić, Assistant Professor

Osijek, 2019

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U Osijeku, 6.9.2019.



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## Abstract

As a combination of sports, entertainment, advertising and patriotism, the Super Bowl provides insight into numerous aspects of America and Americans. By examining this unique event through different perspectives such as sports, television, and the military, the aim of this paper is to describe the Super Bowl from its modest beginnings to the nowadays excesses in order to determine what it reveals about American society. It started as just a game, but there were many additions to the event, mostly entertaining in nature, that changed it and also the way people view it. The main focus was on these changes that made this event more popular and more American. Television made it available and commercials overshadowed the game itself, becoming one of the favorite parts of the Super Bowl. As a sporting event, the Super Bowl gave American football the status of the premier sport in the United States and because it celebrates America and Americans it has become a favorite holiday. Also, the Super Bowl arouses patriotic feelings because it incorporates notions of religion as well as their six core values. When what they value and believe in is not in sync with the Super Bowl, they even raise their voice against it. In addition, the way the game runs, and how the military also has its role in the Super Bowl, gives the picture of the USA as the war-oriented nation that is has been since the foundation of the country.

**Keywords:** Super Bowl, American society, patriotism, values



## Introduction

The Super Bowl is the game of American football that takes place in the United States at the beginning of every year. But this event is more than just a game. It is a reflection of American values and beliefs and as such offers a window into American society and culture. This paper aims to explore the Super Bowl from its first years to the present and focus on determining what this particular event reveals about American society, in particular its basic traditions and values from many different perspectives.

In the first chapter, this paper discusses the history of the Super Bowl highlighting how it has changed from the first game to the present. It also exemplifies some of the changes that turned the Super Bowl into a massively celebrated event.

The second chapter describes the Super Bowl as it is today. It presents it as a television spectacle that almost every year breaks viewing records in the United States, as well as globally. It also reveals the commercialism and consumerism of the Super Bowl through the commercials that have become a big part of the event. This chapter also presents the Super Bowl as the biggest sporting event in the United States, and the reasons behind this title. Moreover, it shows that the celebrations of this event have made the Super Bowl a holiday, which celebrates American society. This chapter concludes with a discussion on why people raise their voice against the Super Bowl and what this says about them.

In the final chapter, this paper gives a view on American identity and how it affects the way Americans see themselves. It also discusses the six core American values and gives the example of how these, and some other positive and negative sports values are incorporated into the Super Bowl. Furthermore, it presents militaristic notions that are visible during ceremonies that are a part of the event, which present Americans as a war-oriented nation. In addition, the final chapter explains what American civil religion is, and how their religion is reflected in the Super Bowl. As a result, this paper confirms that the Super Bowl is a reflection of American society.

## 1. The History of the Super Bowl

It all started on 15 January 1967, when “the National Football League (NFL) and the American Football League (AFL) staged the first AFL-NFL World Championship Game, a contest that would soon become known in common parlance as the Super Bowl” (Hopsicker and Dyreson, “Super Bowl Sunday” 1). At the time, it was impossible to foresee what a spectacle this event would become. Baseball was a more popular sport in America than football, but thanks to the American football community there was some interest in the game. As Hopsicker and Dyreson state, the first game was held in Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum that could seat more than 90,000 spectators (“Super Bowl Sunday” 1), being one of the biggest football stadiums in the United States. They further describe that tickets for the game cost between \$6 and \$12, which was a reasonable price, but unfortunately there were more than 35,000 empty seats on game day (“Super Bowl Sunday” 1). This shows that the Super Bowl did not attract people right away. Due to the poor public response to the event, Los Angeles was being mocked for not selling the game. But according to Mike Waldner, who covered the game for the Daily Breeze: “People weren’t going to travel from Green Bay to L.A. for a game like this. If the Rams weren’t in it, people here didn’t care. The Rams used to draw 100,000 in the ’50s” (qtd. in Fowler).



Fig. 1. “Green Bay Packers Hall of Fame cornerback Herb Adderley (26) runs back a kickoff during Super Bowl I Jan. 15, 1967, at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles. The Green Bay Packers defeated the Kansas City Chiefs 35-10.” (Fowler, Clay. “Super Bowl I: It all kicked off in the LA Coliseum.” *Los Angeles Daily News*, February 6, 2016, [www.dailynews.com/2016/02/06/super-bowl-i-it-all-kicked-off-in-the-la-coliseum/](http://www.dailynews.com/2016/02/06/super-bowl-i-it-all-kicked-off-in-the-la-coliseum/). Accessed June 21, 2019.)

The first game was held between NFL’s Green Bay Packers and AFL’s Kansas City Chiefs, where the Packers took the victory. This game was a celebration of a merger between these two rival leagues, making a “new conglomerate, which kept the moniker ‘NFL’ to identify itself”

(Hopsicker and Dyreson, “Super Bowl Sunday” 1). Hopsicker and Dyreson add that Super Bowl I was broadcasted by the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBA) and the National Broadcasting System (NBC) to around 60 million viewers (“Super Bowl Sunday” 1). Fowler explains how the video of the game wasn’t well preserved because neither CBS nor NBC kept a copy of the broadcast in their archives, which was usual at the time. Hopsicker and Dyreson further describe that there were no pregame shows or special commercials during the broadcast of Super Bowl I. Also, there were performances by Grambling College, the University of Michigan, and the University of Arizona marching bands during the half-time show that played the ‘Star Spangled Banner’ before the game commenced, instead of world-famous pop stars (“Super Bowl Sunday” 1). This shows that at the time the main focus was on the game since the entertainment was not so big and flashy. This was only the first step in the fascinating history of the Super Bowl.

### 1.1. From a Football Game to an Entertaining Event

The Super Bowl remained “just a football game” for a few more years, but by the mid-nineteen-seventies, it became one of the major events in the United States. One of the reasons for this change is the criticism that the game lacks parity. Rarely did it happen that a game’s outcome ended as a close-call, so writers for sports columns in the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties described the Super Bowls as: “‘hopelessly’ and ‘unbearably dull,’ ‘sleep-inducing’ and ‘lacking high drama’” (Hopsicker and Dyreson, “The Super Bowl’s Evolution”). This showed how Americans love and need competitiveness, so there had to be some changes. The NFL came up with the idea to enrich the production of the Super Bowl with expensive shows that would distract from the dullness of the game. “Since the 1970s, succeeding Super Bowl instalments have pushed the boundaries of nationalistic and patriotic displays, tested the scope of the metaphors describing conspicuously consumptive practices, and branded the event as a national holiday” (Hopsicker and Dyreson, “Super Bowl Sunday” 2). As Schalter describes, there were 49 installments of the game. For example, one of the changes was bringing world-famous singers to perform. In 1972 (Super Bowl VI), Ella Fitzgerald, accompanied by trumpeter Al Hirt, performed during the half-time. Furthermore, in 1977 (Super Bowl XI), Disney's show during half-time included crowd participation for the first time. Giving a special place to advertising and commercials also played a part in taking the focus away from the game. Even though the Super Bowl is supposed to be a sporting event, the organizers added shows, concerts and commercials that have become the highlight of the event. Here it is visible how much Americans love and rely on entertainment.

The game itself also became more interesting recently, because the end result was decided by a few points difference. It became more competitive this way, but the game still remained in

the shadow of half-time shows and commercials. The Super Bowl may be the biggest sporting event in the United States, but it is more of an entertaining event. When compared with European football or soccer, one can see how the World Cup game is in the limelight and shows that events that accompany the game are just an addition that remains less important than the game. The Super Bowl is different because the main focus is not on football.

## 2. The Super Bowl in the Present

The Super Bowl now differs from its first years. As quoted in Gems's research, Butterworth describes it as: "a two week long national festival promoting such American values as nationalism, civic pride, capitalist excess and consumption, with particular attention to militaristic displays of power" (5-6). It is the event that brings Americans together, where with friends and family they eat and drink and even tape the game in case something historical happens, or a funny commercial occurs. This togetherness shows true patriotism among Americans, who cherish their country more than anything. Even the suicide rates drop when the Super Bowl is on. These gatherings consist of "feasts of specific food and drink – chicken wings and crudités, chips and guacamole, fried finger foods and pizza, soda and beer, Bloody Marys and other football-themed cocktails" (Hopsicker and Dyreson, "Super Bowl Sunday" 2). Butterworth describes his Super Bowl Sunday this way:

Super Bowl Sunday, and I am surrounded by family and friends. We are all too happy to give in to this distinctly American ritual of excess. We have eaten entirely too much well before kickoff. Late in the seemingly endless pregame coverage, beers in hand, a friend points to the television, asking, "Are you watching this?" I turn my attention to the screen, struggling to hear over the enthusiastic conversation in the room. But I am struck immediately by the images: ink and quill moving across parchment paper, colonial architecture, bald eagles, and, of course, waving American flags. "Thank God I'm taping this," I thought. (318)

It is visible how happy and proud Americans are when they watch the Super Bowl since the event awakes patriotic feelings in them. It is almost like they witness history in the making when they watch the Super Bowl, so they feel the need to record it.

As time went on, football surpassed baseball in popularity and became a reflection of American society and culture. One event can change everything. American football is now a premier sport in the United States, "even though other sports such as basketball, baseball/softball, and soccer boast far more recreational participants" (Morris 1). Hopsicker adds how both critics and advocates of the Super Bowl can make meaning of this shared American experience (25).

### 2.1. The Super Bowl as a Television Spectacle

The Super Bowl is seen today primarily as a television spectacle. As already mentioned, since the nineteen-seventies American football and the Super Bowl have gained even more attention in the United States. Those who weren't able to attend the game in real life watched the game on television. These broadcasts helped the Super Bowl gain in popularity because it became available to almost everyone and also because Americans love television. Hopsicker describes

how Super Bowl III made television shares and ratings grow quickly, and how Super Bowl IV attracted the largest television audience recorded up to that time. He further explains that every year, half of all existing televisions in the United States have been tuned in to the Super Bowl (26). Since Super Bowl I, the number of viewers has more than doubled. Dyreson presented how enormous the audience of the Super Bowl nowadays is:

The 'golden anniversary' game finished with a 'mere' 111.9 million viewers to earn a third-place ranking behind Super Bowl XLIX and Super Bowl XLVIII, which garnered 114.4 million and 112.2 million, respectively. Super Bowl 50's score still made it the third most-watched programme in the history of US television broadcasting, joining a score of other Super Bowls that rule American airwaves as the dominant programming in the history of that medium. (139)

It surely is the most-watched event in the United States. However, Dyreson notes that the real number of global television rankings is really hard to come by and locate (140). He further adds that, in the twenty-first century, around a billion viewers around the world watch the Super Bowl every year, but those are not actual viewers, but rather 'potential' watchers who have access to broadcasts (140). So many people may have access to the broadcast, but that does not necessarily mean that they watch it. Hopsicker and Dyreson explain that the NFL is trying to transform the Super Bowl into a global mega-event that would be a rival to World Cups and Olympic games ("Super Bowl Sunday" 3). However, the feeling of shared experience and euphoria that is seen in the United States has not spread through the rest of the world and still remains an event that only the United States audience can appreciate to its fullest. Of course, many people from other countries watch the Super Bowl, but it is not the same feeling and experience as for Americans.

In their article "The Super Bowl's evolution from football game to entertainment extravaganza," Hopsicker and Dyreson discuss that most of the people tune in to watch the Super Bowl only because of the entertaining program before and during the broadcast, and the commercials. The viewers are not interested in the game itself. This shows how Americans prefer entertainment over sports. If the NFL had not made all the changes to boost the entertaining part of the Super Bowl, and if there were no television broadcasts and media presence that made it more available and more attractive to people, the event would probably not reach the status it has today.

## 2.2. Commercialism and Consumerism of the Super Bowl

The television broadcast of the Super Bowl has helped to push through some brands and products thanks to the commercials, which awakened the materialistic nature of the Americans.

Due to the involvement of the media, the Super Bowl increased its popularity, which attracted American businesses and corporations that saw the opportunity there to attract customers and sponsors. The bigger the audience, the bigger the chances to make a breakthrough and earn money. Advertising is an easy way to “manipulate” Americans. Corporations give Americans what they love, entertainment through funny commercials and stuff they can buy to satisfy their needs for material possession, and they earn money in the process. It seems like a classic win-win situation. The Super Bowl thus became more than a football game. According to Hopsicker and Dyreson, it became an “Ad Bowl,” “an unofficial but hyper-intense marketing competition to produce the most creative and memorable television commercial targeting the Super Bowl’s enormous captive audience” (“The Super Bowl’s Evolution”). This event became a target for many corporations, and they needed to pay a certain amount of money to push their name and their products. McAllister and Galindo-Ramirez describe how in 1967, a 60-second commercial cost \$85 000 (\$600 000 adjusted by the 2016 inflation). This price was considered ridiculous, but fifty years later, this price would not cover even four seconds on air (46-47) (see table 1).

Table 1 Super Bowl Commercial Prices, 30-s Spot, Select Years

Year	Then-current cost	Adjusted for 2016 inflation
1967	\$40,000	\$289,000
1970	\$78,200	\$482,000
1975	\$107,000	\$476,000
1980	\$222,000	\$649,000
1984	\$368,200	\$848,000
1985	\$525,000	\$1.17 mil
1995	\$1.15 mil	\$1.81 mil
1999	\$1.6 mil	\$2.30 mil
2000	\$2.1 mil	\$2.92 mil
2005	\$2.4 mil	\$2.94 mil
2015	\$4.5 mil	\$4.54 mil
2016	\$5.0 mil	\$5.00 mil

Source: McAllister, Matthew P., and Galindo-Ramirez, Elysia. “Fifty Years of Super Bowl Commercials, Thirty-Two Years of Spectacular Consumption.” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 34, no. 1-2, 2017, pp. 46-64. Taylor & Francis Online, [doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1336162](https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1336162).

It is visible how important the Super Bowl is to the advertising industry since they are willing to pay enormous prices just to promote themselves and their products. Cordova says that the NFL and its media investors wait for a public reaction of whether they approve or at least not disapprove of their product. They get their feedback through the public domain, such as institutions, commercials, and news media (7).

McAllister and Galindo-Ramirez describe the Super Bowl commercials in the following way: “they are themselves a highly visible, anticipated, and influential cultural event, one that explicitly celebrates and promotes commercialism” (47). One example of how advertising during the Super Bowl can help with product and company recognition is Apple’s Macintosh commercial that aired in 1984. Cortsen describes how this commercial, created by the famous movie producer Ridley Scott, was showed only once on national television, but Apple even nowadays receives recognition for the commercial. A Super bowl commercial can certainly help with the promotion, but that help needs to be paid a lot.

In their work “Fifty Years of Super Bowl Commercials, Thirty-Two Years of Spectacular Consumption,” McAllister and Galindo-Ramirez mention Guy Debord and his idea of spectacle and spectacle consumption. According to Debord, every modern capitalist society, such as the American society, can be exemplified by spectacle. He describes the spectacle as a large and visually dominant event that is driven by commodity logic. When the spectacle is combined with promotion, then it is a form of spectacle consumption. As Debord further explains, spectacle consumption involves advertising, merchandising, media coverage, social media and other marketing forms for promoting purposes (48). Super Bowl commercials can be recognized as spectacle consumption because they are not just regular commercials, but they are the most expected and most viewed part of the Super Bowl.

Since commercials are highlighted during the Super Bowl, one aspect of American society is also put in the limelight, and that is consumerism. An unknown author described it in the following way:

With every decade, we take another step deeper and deeper into the pit of consumerism. We have built mega mall complexes to satisfy our need for material possession, spend more than Spain and Italy do annually on advertising, and worse of all, we reveal[sic] in it. Super Bowl Sunday has become a monument to our addiction...

With hundreds of catastrophic dilemmas facing mankind today, it is amazing to think that we still contemplate spending fortunes to convince ourselves that we should buy Doritos over any other brand of chips because the commercial was just too funny to resist. (“More than just football”)



The consumerism aspect that dominates sends a picture of the wrong values people have nowadays. If the product is popular, then they will buy it. It does not matter that sometimes they cannot afford those products and that there are cheaper products available with basically the same quality. American consumers give too much attention to recognition and status, and if they see certain brands and products promoted during the Super Bowl, people will feel the need to buy them. Americans during the Super Bowl spend the most on food and drinks as a preparation for the event, as well as on new TVs and betting. Cordova also pointed out the consumerism in the Super Bowl and described it as “the economic backbone of America because big fancy new toys help people identify their success” (49). He further noted that the NFL and the Super Bowl today are a representation of free-market capitalism (consumerism, corporatism, commercialism) and Americanism (85). Individuals feel like they strengthen their status and their identity as Americans if they watch the Super Bowl and consume products that are promoted during this purely American event.

### 2.3. The Super Bowl as a Sporting Spectacle

Of course, the Super Bowl is more than just a television spectacle that promotes commercialism and consumerism. The Super Bowl is the climax of the NFL season where the two best teams, from two conferences; the American Football Conference (AFC) and the National Football Conference (NFC), compete for the title. Morris says that American football has become the embodiment of American society (1). Even the world named the sport American football (in the United States it is called only football). If we were to ignore the dominance of commercialism, it is no wonder that the Super Bowl and the game they wait for the entire year are so popular. It is the celebration of their society and their exceptionalism. No other country in the world has this type of event that is genuinely theirs. Because of that, “players and even sports broadcasters are held at such high regards equivalent to role models for citizens. The NFL is conceived as, and purports itself to be, a model for America” (Cordova 2).

In her article “Why Football and the Super Bowl are Staples in American culture,” Alverio mentions how the NFL, compared to baseball’s 162 games a season, has the least number of games - 16 a season. That is less than any other major sport in the United States. Because of the lower number of games throughout the year, American football and the Super Bowl receive greater excitement and every game is an event:

For most Americans, every football game is special. Football connects us under our shared longing of seeing our teams win. We celebrate with blown out parties surrounded by

family, friend, or foe. We support our teams with all our might, buy jerseys, merchandise, and slather their team colors on us in fervent support...

We debate our favorite players or banter with fans of the opposing teams or jump off seats and scream at the TV as our favorite team falls behind... (Alverio)

It is clearer why the Super Bowl is praised as America's biggest sporting event. It does not occur very often and when it does, it is celebrated massively. That is why it needs to be better than ever every time since people wait for it the entire year and the expectations are high.

#### 2.4. The Super Bowl as a National Holiday

All this popularity of the Super Bowl upgraded its status in the United States. Since its beginnings, the Super Bowl has snowballed into "an American institution, producing an experience that exudes the qualities of a quintessential American holiday – a holiday that, paradoxically, frequently seems to treat the NFL's championship game as an ancillary to the festivities" (Hopsicker and Dyreson, "Super Bowl Sunday" 2). The Super Bowl is now seen as the new holiday, and Hopsicker and Dyreson mention that more people in the United States watch the Super Bowl than, for example, vote in elections or attend religious services ("Super Bowl Sunday" 2). It shows how big of an event the Super Bowl is and also what an important role it has in people's lives.

They further describe how, just like during other holidays, a day in the life of an American is different during the Super Bowl. People gather around, parties are thrown, and businesses close just for this special event. Just like Thanksgiving includes special food and drinks, the same goes for the Super Bowl and the already mentioned chicken wings and beer. It also includes nationalistic elements, such as flag waving and singing the national anthem, just like on the Fourth of July. Massive consumption is also celebrated, just like during Christmas time ("Super Bowl Sunday" 2-3). The Super Bowl can be seen as a combination of all these holidays, and the dedication people have for this event makes it even more special. All of this proves that the Super Bowl is a holiday for Americans.

#### 2.5. The People's Voice in the Super Bowl

Americans also come together not only to watch the Super Bowl but also to raise their voice against irregularities and injustices and to boycott. This shows how important justice and social awareness are to them since they are willing to boycott their favorite event in the year.

The biggest example is the boycotting of the 2019 Super Bowl as a way of supporting the former NFL player Colin Kaepernick. According to Law, Kaepernick has been a part of the

contemporary civil rights movement since 2016. That year he refused to stand for the national anthem because he could not show pride for a country that still oppresses Black people and people of color. A lot of people, including celebrities and other activists decided to skip the Super Bowl to show support for his bravery and activism. African American singers such as Rihanna and Jay-Z even refused to perform at the Super Bowl to support Kaepernick who sacrificed his job for them. Finally, the group Maroon 5 (white performers) took the stage, but received a backlash, because of their decision not to support Kaepernick.

Performing at the Super Bowl may be one of the biggest gigs for singers, but it has shown that sometimes sports and entertainment are not a priority. Americans supporting the boycott emphasized their intent to erase social inequality and live in a society where everyone has the same rights. Not even sacrificing participation in this “truly American” event stopped them from persisting in their intentions.

### 3. The Super Bowl and the American Identity

The Super Bowl includes elements of the American identity, which helped it obtain a bigger audience. As Barker describes, “national identity is a form of identification with representations of shared experiences and history. These are told through stories, literature, popular culture and the media” (qtd. in Cordova 57). As already mentioned, the Super Bowl is a form of a shared experience through which Americans identify themselves with one another and feel like they belong together to American society: “football viewers consume the American identity when watching NFL games. Their active participation in celebrations like the Super Bowl helps fashion their external identity into a more notable American one” (Cordova 93).

The American identity is formed by their beliefs and their values. Americans live by their values and have an idealistic picture of their society and their country. These idealistic views are also presented in the Super Bowl, and people worship the event because it supports their civil religion. This event gives us a picture of Americans. What they believe in and what they value most is seen in the Super Bowl, and not only in celebrations, but also in the game itself. When they watch their biggest event of the year, they feel like they are true Americans.

#### 3.1. American Values in the Super Bowl

The six core American values are represented in the Super Bowl. These values are individual freedom, self-reliance, hard work, material wealth, equality of opportunity, and competition. Competition, material wealth and hard work are the most represented. The Super Bowl also promotes some positive and negative sport values, which can be representative of the American society

Firstly, the values of individual freedom and self-reliance can refer to the players in the game. Even though they are a part of a team, they rely on their own strength, energy and ability to run. One bad individual can break a team, so for a team to work, everyone needs to bring their A game on. Thus, the Super Bowl promotes values of physical activity and health, which is more than necessary since America is considered to have the highest rates of obesity.

The value of hard work is also incorporated in the Super Bowl. Hard training and pressures are a part of every football player’s daily routine. Davis quoted Perry who described how much they run before the Super Bowl:

...the hills behind the Gillette Stadium are a big part of the Patriots' training. There are two hills, according to Perry. “One is 20 yards long and steep. The other is 60 yards

long and features more of a gradual incline,” he wrote. They are both finely manicured, with 5-yard lines so players know the distance left to run.

Hard work is important for the players if they want to outplay their rivals and be able to endure the game’s violence. Hard work is also connected to the value of doing your best. Americans love to be the best, so they work hard and do their utmost to achieve that.

The next value is material wealth. As already mentioned, large quantities of money are involved in the game when it comes to the Super Bowl. The NFL earns around \$3 billion a year just from the broadcasters (Handley). Together with the money they get from their sponsors and from corporations for commercials, comprises a crazy amount of money that the NFL gets from the Super Bowl. But it is not only the NFL that earns a lot. The winning team’s players get around \$110,000 each, and the second-best team’s players get around half of that amount each (Handley). Together with their yearly salary, the amount is even bigger. This is enough to say that material wealth is significantly incorporated in the Super Bowl.

Equality of opportunity is also important. Both teams that compete in the final have the same conditions and the first possession or side is decided by a coin-toss. The Super Bowl is even played at a neutral stadium, so there is no home advantage for any team. This shows just how the sports value of fair play is important to Americans.

Finally, competition is the sixth value. American football as a sport promotes the value of winning, and to win, you need to be competitive. The Super Bowl is the final competition in which two rivals compete against each other, so the event is a huge promotor of competition. One negative sports value is hardcore competitiveness, which brings out the violence in the game. This value is representative of Americans, who prefer violent activities as a way of entertaining. All of the above-mentioned values associated with the Super Bowl truly promote and reflect Americanism.

### 3.2. Notions of Militarism and War in the Super Bowl

Other aspects of American society are militarism and obsession with war. The United States’ history has seen wars on American soil as well as abroad. It is no surprise that some notions of militarism and war accompany the country’s biggest event. During the Super Bowl, one can see militaristic displays of power, for example, flyovers by military jets (see figure 2). Gems describes how the military is involved in the event:

Military personnel are then often involved in ceremonial functions, such as the coin toss to determine which team will get the ball first, the presentation of the American flag, the singing of the national anthem, and tributes or medal presentations to personnel wounded

in wars, none of which have anything to do with the actual playing of the game other than the symbolic portrayal of nationalism and the warrior ethic. (6)



Fig. 2. “The Blue Angels perform a flyover during the singing of the national anthem before the start of Super Bowl 50 at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California.” (Duran, Doug. February 7, 2016. *Stars and Stripes*; [www.stripes.com/air-force-super-bowl-flyover-features-combat-fighters-1.508475](http://www.stripes.com/air-force-super-bowl-flyover-features-combat-fighters-1.508475). Accessed June 24, 2019.

As seen, the military has a big role in the Super Bowl, and there is a reason for it. Gudmestad states that the military accepted to go along with the presentation at the Super Bowl, as it was a way of explaining the humanitarian mission in Afghanistan and softening the harsh realities of war. It was easier to get the population on your side when you are involved in the nation's most patriotic event. Similar manifestations also occur in the events prior to the Super Bowl. Those are called Salute the Service games that are hosted by all teams. In these games:

...every player wears a military service branch sticker on his helmet, the sideline gear has camouflage elements, and coaches incorporate military symbolism into their clothing. Each team decides upon further military elements for the game itself, but flourishes include military personnel singing the National Anthem, flags and veterans on the field, flyovers, receptions for military personnel... (Gudmestad)

The NFL's connection with the military got even more intense after the 9/11 attacks. As Gems explains, players were sent to visit wounded veterans of the Iraq war in hospitals. They also sent football equipment to military teams, and, in partnership with the government, sponsored a program “Operation Tribute to Freedom,” a program that promotes patriotism, nationalism, and support for ending the war in the Middle East (8). All of these above-mentioned examples show how the military enjoys the support of the NFL. However, the 9/11 attacks “may have yielded the most concise iteration yet of sport culture's rhetorical endorsement of the ‘war on terror’”

(Butterworth 318). Butterworth here refers to the Super Bowl in 2008 and its production that “exploits patriotism and militarism in ways that justify the mission of the “war on terror” and undermine the democratic values for which the war purportedly is being waged” (319). One sees a discrepancy here. Firstly, they promoted peace and ending of the war, but later they promoted and supported the war. Cordova also comments on how the patriotism and militarism in the Super Bowl’s presentation of war have become a mask for the war, which leads to Americans supporting the troops and the war (13). It also gives the Super Bowl a different purpose, other than promoting sports and entertainment. Those are negative aspects of the connection between the Super Bowl and the military, as they promote wrong values and war.

A good example of this connection is the heroization of Pat Tillman. As Gems describes, Pat Tillman was a professional football player, who gave up his 3.6-million-dollar contract to join the U.S. Army in 2002 (7). This change of heart happened after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Two years into his service, Tillman got killed in Afghanistan. Gems describes that as a reward for his sacrifice, he was awarded a Silver Star medal by the Army, and was also extolled by the White House and praised as a role model (7). All these rewards for his sacrifice show how important the military and military service is to the NFL. Tillman was willing to sacrifice his peaceful life and lucrative career to fight for the United States, and everyone honored him for that.

Furthermore, the game itself is structured like war, “where physical domination and territorial invasion are the winning strategies” (Cordova 1). In American football, the two main activities are blocking and tackling, which shows that the game is very aggressive and violent. Mandelbaum describes the structure of the game in the following way:

From a distance, a football game resembles a pre-modern battle: two groups of men in uniforms, wearing protective gear, crash into each other ... The sport’s coaches are its generals, the players its troops. Football teams mirror the tripartite organization of classical armies: the beefy linemen correspond to the infantry; the smaller, lighter players who actually carry the ball are the equivalent of cavalry; and the quarterback who advances the ball by throwing it through the air and the receivers who catch it are the sport’s version of an army’s artillery.

One may also notice the notion of war in football discourse. Mandelbaum explains some of these terms:

A forward pass far down the field is a “long bomb.” The large men arrayed against each other along the line of scrimmage, where each football play begins, are said, like the soldiers on the western front in World War I, to be skirmishing “in the trenches.” An all-

out assault on a quarterback attempting to pass is a “blitz,” taking its name from a comparable German tactic in World War II—the blitzkrieg, or lightning war.

Gems notes some other war-related terms in American football, such as coffin, aerial attack, run and shoot, shotgun, sudden death, and field general (6-7). When taken into account that this is America’s favorite and most popular sport, it reveals America’s obsession with war. Cordova explained how this obsession is and can be transferred to an obsession with football (13), which is like a socially acceptable form of organized violence.

### 3.3. The American Civil Religion and the Super Bowl

One aspect that also forms an identity is religion. In the United States, there is no official religion by law but there is a national religion according to which people worship their country and their society. Celebrations that occur during the Super Bowl celebrate the nation, and people congregate for a purpose:

The very notion of American civil religion aims to satisfy the desire Americans have to be considered - what the dominant American culture would define as - ‘good.’ In instances of rituals like the Super Bowl, the show is produced in a way to celebrate the “distorted” or “exaggerated” concept of America in order to gain favor among their audience. (Cordova 56)

This proves that the Super Bowl is the perfect example of their national religion. When they promote the United States as a force and as people get this patriotic feeling when they watch the Super Bowl it only makes them worship themselves and the United States even more.

Chidester (paraphrased in Cordova) gives credit to Reagan for establishing a civil religion that presents America as something worth dying for. He explains how this sacrificial civil religion can be seen in the Super Bowl and how the viewers, by watching football participate in this national festival of celebrating an ideal America that is worth sacrifice (4-5). This shows how passionate Americans are about their country that they would even die for it. As Cordova further explains, there are some comparisons between Reagan’s sacrificial religion and the NFL’s pro-America ideology. They are both idols of consumption and they project a very similar worldview. This worldview consists of free enterprise, God (in the NFL that is America), and there is the military that defends those worldviews (11).

Since the Super Bowl is an event that celebrates American society and many people participate in these celebrations, one may say that their sacrificial religion is now prominently seen in their popular culture:



Although civil religion, as Bellah defined it, still operates in America, these national religious impulses have thoroughly diffused through popular culture. As a result, Americans assimilate their civil religion less through the constitutional arms of the U.S. government—the executive, legislative, or judicial branches—than through the productions of film, television, radio, and other media of popular culture (Chidester 6, qtd. in Cordova 39).

All in all, everything that makes American identity distinct (values, ideals, and beliefs) is used in the Super Bowl to gain popularity and to promote the Americans as an exceptional nation.

## Conclusion

To conclude, when looking at many different aspects of the Super Bowl, such as entertainment, television, and sports, it is obvious that this event reflects American society. The United States has the privilege to have such an event that both celebrates and represents them. The Super Bowl started small, but greatly expanded throughout the years thanks to the changes that were made. These changes made the Super Bowl more special and more American.

The Super Bowl is now seen as a shared experience that brings all Americans together, which has made American football the most popular sport in the United States. Since it does not occur very often, the Super Bowl is the biggest sporting event for American society and every game is a spectacle. The presence of media and television broadcasts are very important because they are the reasons the Super Bowl has become an intensely popular and widely known event.

However, commercials are now the new highlighted part of the Super Bowl, and many Americans admit that they watch it just because of the commercials. Corporations pay huge amounts of money just to promote themselves and their products. After all, it pays because Americans are known for consumerism, and Super Bowl advertising impacts their spending on these advertised products. Although the primary focus should be on the game, because consumerism is deeply rooted in American society, it is not surprising that it is not. Also, their connection with the military reveals America's obsession with war and violence that is a big part of their history.

Finally, their values and their beliefs are symbolically represented in the Super Bowl. They even raise their voice if something is not aligned with their values and beliefs. Watching the Super Bowl impacts their identity because they feel more American, and their national religion reveals an ideal image that they have about their country and themselves. All in all, this lavish event that has changed throughout the years heavily reflects American society, i.e. their passions, habits, priorities, and all other aspects that make them a proud and exceptional nation.

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