

COMMENTARY OPEN ACCESS

Petropower in Law-Enforcement Advertising at Super Bowl LIX

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a recruitment commercial from the Super Bowl on 9 February 2025 in terms of its spectacularisation of petroleum's abiding yet volatile influence. The minute-long piece on behalf of federal law enforcement indicates how the workings of power in the United States of America are entangled with the ubiquity of oil extraction, transportation and consumption. It is concluded that such marketing is an expression of insecurities about the durability of the nation's global dominance in a period when low-carbon transitions are reshaping geopolitical structures.

Sports events are significant occasions in the public sphere. An archetypal media spectacle with extraordinary buzz-generating capacity is the Super Bowl of the National Football League in the United States of America (Adams 2010; Fuller 2008; Koch 2023). Plenty of mythologising narratives surround this moment of collective identity formation (Hyvärinen 2010; Real 1975). Indeed, the format of the annual game is symptomatic of how governmentality takes place in the nation that prides itself on being the Land of the Free (Card and Dahl 2011; Dean 2010; Handelman 1998). Corporations seize on the hot-blooded final by creating adverts that attempt to refashion spectators' lives, as exemplified by Ridley Scott's award-winning 60-s commercial for Apple's release of the Macintosh personal computer in 1984 (Roche 2017; Schwartz 1993).

The showdown on 9 February 2025 took place at Caesars Superdome in New Orleans. Unprecedentedly, the attendance of a sitting president amplified hype and security (Price and Miller 2025; Wells 2025). During the evening pre-show, there was a 1-min piece of messaging for the Secret Service, titled 'A History of Protection'. It was the handiwork of the filmmaker Michael Bay, whose box-office hits include *Bad Boys* and five instalments of *Transformers*. The commercial was expedited

in a fortnight at a cost of \$2 million, amounting to the federal agency's highest outlay for a single instance of marketing (Wild et al. 2025). Ostensibly, its goal was twofold: first, to shore up institutional morale, stricken by the assassination attempt on the re-election campaign trail over the summer; second, to boost intake in a period of exceptionally low interest.

The advert's whirlwind storyline gave an impression of the landings in Normandy for Operation Overlord in 1944, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Project Apollo during 1961–1972, the approach of United Airlines Flight 175 towards the World Trade Center's South Tower on 11 September 2001, and the operation of Air Force One in 2025. Memory-work was undertaken by means of archival stills, computer-generated clips, orchestral music and snatches of voiceover: 'America has always stepped forward in time of need, throughout our short but powerful history' (United States Secret Service 2025, 0:06–0:12).

Our paper scrutinises the notion of 'powerful history' in relation to flows of petroleum that saturate the 60-s spectacular. In view of particularities of content and form in the affectively laden advert, we posit that the American value system is entwined with consumption of hydrocarbon products (Hajer and Versteeg 2019;

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Schmelzer and Büttner 2024). Here, energy nationalism in the petrostate is explored as an issue of mass media as much as landscape management (Bertoloni 2025; McCrone 2021; Rosati 2007). With respect to methodological positioning, our event-as-text analysis is rooted in geographies of communication, health and industry (Getz and Page 2016; Smith et al. 2021; Wolfe 2024). ‘A History of Protection’ is taken as epitomising the Information Age’s attention economy because the reach of advertising at the Super Bowl is akin to a blockbuster film (McAllister and Galindo-Ramirez 2017; Müller 2015; Stelter 2025). The commercial’s manifestations of energy-intensive infrastructures are indicative of the fossil-fuel industry’s insidiousness in the United States of America, where petrosapes of all shapes and sizes are constituted by a pervasive apparatus for extraction, transportation and utilisation (Gordo 2015; Kaposy 2017; Van Neste 2020).

Four screenshots are representative of an atmosphere of wonder that is conjured through displays of technological heft (Figures 1–4). Each snippet of punchy optics is reminiscent of a cinematic hit: Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*; Damien Chazelle’s *First Man*; Oliver Stone’s *World Trade Center*; Wolfgang Petersen’s *Air Force One*. There is an array of

thunderous vehicles (troopships, tanks, a space rocket, jumbo jets) that are essentially masses of metal propelled by the combustion of hydrocarbon products. Petromasculinity—‘the convergence [...] between climate change, a threatened fossil fuel system, and an increasingly fragile Western hypermasculinity’ (Daggett 2018, 29)—comes to a head during the parade of phallic behemoths in the guise of the weaponry from World War Two, the launch from Cape Canaveral during the Space Race, the Twin Towers and the Boeing VC-25A (Beer 1990; Harris 1996; Jones 2003). Against a backdrop of percussion/piano/strings escalating to fever pitch, the husky voiceover exhorts enlistment ‘to keep this idea alive’ (United States Secret Service 2025, 0:37–0:39). The ‘idea’ of American supremacy is portrayed as dependent on continuing to burn through fossil fuels.

Such a spectacle has the hallmarks of petropolitical insecurities. The commercial brazenly plays into fantasies of domination along the lines of the predilections of groups that stand to gain from clinging to dirty energy. Many of the Republicans’ electoral wins in 2024 were attributable to stoking sentiments about the United States of America falling behind, as feels plausible in an increasingly multipolar world where the high table



FIGURE 1 | Tanks, infantry, light vehicles and barbed wire on a beach adjacent to troopships and a barrage balloon (United States Secret Service 2025, 0:10).

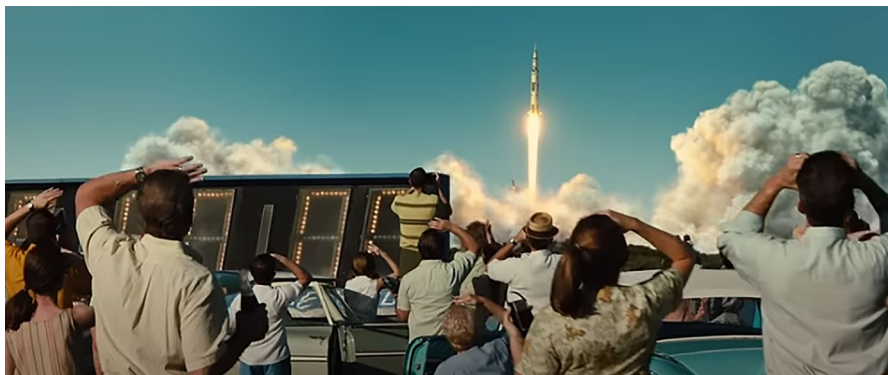


FIGURE 2 | A large digital clock, an assortment of cars and several people shielding their eyes from a rocket’s blast-off in the distance (United States Secret Service 2025, 0:14).



FIGURE 3 | In a classroom, a television alongside the Stars and Stripes is showing a jumbo jet on course for the World Trade Center, which has one tower already ablaze (United States Secret Service 2025, 0:27).



FIGURE 4 | An airstrip with a Boeing VC-25A in presidential livery, functioning as Air Force One (United States Secret Service 2025, 0:49).

of geopolitics appears bound for a reshuffle on the basis of a low-carbon agenda that would entail a gradual downgrading of nations with an appetite for fossil fuels over the long term (Acharya 2018; Cameron 2005; Mezzadra and Neilson 2024). In these untraditional circumstances, lots of Americans are inclined to fear the diminishment of the brawn of the Stars and Stripes, which translates into support for a presidential petro-futurist agenda prioritising ‘the citizens of Pittsburgh, not [...] the severe energy restrictions inflicted by the Paris Accord’ (Washington Post 2017, 20:14–20:58). Concerns over macroeconomics and international affairs thus lurk just beneath the surface of the advert’s pomp.

Since John Davison Rockefeller’s era-defining inauguration of the Standard Oil Company in Ohio in 1870, petropower has developed into a pivotal component of nation-building mythology (Grau 2023). Nowadays, fossil fuels are embedded in American symbolism to the point that a petroleum-run society seems to be the natural way of things (Atkinson et al. 2015; Biernoff and Johnstone 2024). ‘A History of Protection’ expresses the extent to which ‘fossil fuels have [...] mineraliz[ed] visions of the future in the shape of the fossil fueled past’ (Boyer 2023, 8). It is evident that ‘oil has been allied with happiness for North Americans, particularly those who most benefited from oil revenues and infrastructures [...]. Loving oil has a great deal to do with loving media dependent on fossil fuels [...], although often hidden as

such, in plain sight’ (LeMenager 2014, 66). Due to the stranglehold of petroimaginaries, which involve petroleum being presented as necessary for liveability, numerous people apparently struggle to conceive of life after oil, despite its fundamental incompatibility with a low-carbon transition for the sake of keeping the planet habitable for humanity.

Attachment to carbon-intensive practices is the stuff of Republican-leaning times, contrasting with a modicum of hard-fought progress on decarbonisation during the Democrats’ ascendancy. ‘A History of Protection’ conveys the petrostate’s volatile dependency on non-renewables, which are a boon and a curse for the evolution of governance structures across a territory where fossil-fuel lobbyists are unwavering in their interjections (Harmer 2018; Mitchell 2011). The federal agency’s marketing via the Super Bowl is a fraught performance of extractivist force, liable to put the whole world at risk of ecological disturbances (Rosenberg 2013; Slovic et al. 2022). As the Capitalocene accelerates along the destructive trajectory on show in the advert, public health is becoming a matter of decarbonisation to avert petrocatastrophe (Beckfield and Evrard 2023; Dalby 2020; Moore 2018).

Emancipation from petrothirst is subject to buy-in by public and private stakeholders. This undertaking has to go beyond the early twenty-first century’s crop of emissions pricing, institutional signalling and information campaigns in order to grapple

with affective and structural barriers at every level of a society permeated by petrodollars (Bole 2021; Bulkeley et al. 2016; Garrigou and Szeman 2016). ‘A History of Protection’ gives an inkling of regulatory capture based on donations from the fossil-fuel industry for presidential elections and congressional midterms, which is a longstanding catalyst of neoliberal tub-thumping about American values being underpinned by oil (Frazin and Giorno 2024; Goldberg et al. 2020). Republicans’ control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives in January 2025 precipitated not only a rolling-back of federal legislation against polluters but also big investments and tax breaks for the extractive sector, all constituting bad news for the climate (Bialasiewicz and Soriani 2025; Harrison 2025; Yeung 2001).

Ultimately, ‘A History of Protection’ encapsulates the entrenchment of fossil fuels in infrastructures, institutions and inhabitants. A blend of industrial geography and media geography enables a reading of the energy-intensive portrayal as an attempt to consolidate spectators’ commitment to a petrofuturity. The advert veers more towards the tragic than the upbeat, though. Since plucky nations are reaping the rewards of committing to green tech, Americans’ harking-back to petropower is out of step. It is precisely the pugnacious articulation of petromelancholia—‘the grieving of conventional oil resources’ (LeMenager 2014, 102)—that discloses the fragility of attachment to hydrocarbon products in an era of realignment. Akin to the 61-yard touchdown in the Green Bay Packers’ last-ditch victory over the Detroit Lions on 3 December 2015, extolled as the ‘Miracle in Motown’, the Home of the Brave hopes to pitch a Hail Mary to recoup geopolitical supremacy through full-throttle extractivism. Yet, there is a flaw in the game plan for petrodomination: ‘slowing global oil demand growth and [...] slowing global oil production growth—led by relatively flat U.S. crude oil production’ (United States Energy Information Administration 2025, 5). This paradigm-shift lessens the prospect of the Republican administration miraculously outdoing advocates of decarbonisation, however slick the petrofantasy might seem.

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The authors have nothing to report.

Data Availability Statement

This study did not generate a dataset.

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