SUPER-SIZING WHILE THE EARTH BURNS:

Emperor Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus is alleged to have played his fiddle while Rome burned to the ground. Nero did watch Rome burn on the hot night of July 18, 64 B.C. But he didn't fiddle - - at least not with a violin -- because the instrument had yet to be invented. This apocryphal tale persists, however, because it captures moments when imperial governments are caught looking the other way when things get hot.

This aptly describes the United States last weekend.

The Earth isn't burning, but it sure heated up last Friday. That's when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its fourth report, the most sobering, definitive and specific of all. Eleven of the past 12 years are among the warmest ever recorded. Humans are responsible. Earth will warm between 3.2 and 7.2 degrees by the end of the century. The military, political, social and environmental consequences will be costly and tragic. Things are getting hot.

The fiddle for today is the frivolity of the Super Bowl halftime show and its disconnect with the sport itself. The place where marching bands once marched (they're now sidelined in the dark) and where cheerleaders once wore sweaters have become degenerate stages for a celebrity culture that features men in scarves and women in black leather letting their hair down.

But even this was little more than emotional bait for the main show, which took place offstage during commercial breaks. That's when the true wizards of America (not the coaches or quarterbacks) worked their magic to create a gluttonous, sedentary, crime-obsessed and materialist lifestyle that makes them money. For example, my television told me during halftime to drive a Ford monster truck, eat Dunkin' Donuts, drink Pepsi and, on nine separate occasions, watch more TV. None of this is good, either for me or for the planet.

Finally, there is imperial leadership, or lack thereof. Rome was also the only superpower of its day. It took what it wanted, did what it wanted and denied what it wanted. This sounds like U.S. oil policy to me. In the 20th century, we took the King Solomon's Mines of Middle East petroleum. In the 21st, we did what we wanted by invading Iraq to ensure the stability of these riches. And yet we remain in energy denial. For example, U.S. Energy Secretary Samuel W. Bodman, responding to the fourth Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, said that the United States is a "small contributor" to global warming relative to other countries. Meanwhile, the accountants assigned to the global budget of greenhouse emissions report that the United States contributes about 25 percent of the world's total, far more than any nation.

Bodman's comment follows six years of executive obfuscation on climate change, playing up scientific uncertainties, playing down proven realities, muzzling government scientists and refusing to talk turkey with the United Nations.

Humans may be capable of great things, peaceful things, beautiful things and intelligent things. But in our mental basements, we are territorial primates who will instinctively defend our home turf. Like Roman games (other than feeding Christians to lions), football is surrogate warfare between opposing ape bands played in a coliseum before a crowd seeking subliminal catharsis through spectator violence. This is fine with me. To suggest otherwise would be to deny the universal appeal of gladiators, whether protected by polymer plastics or by bronze.

Halftime isn't the problem either, because the players and audience need a break. The problem is that this break has become a commercial shooting gallery for us sitting ducks in the audience. The
marketers have the guns. Their bullets -- sex, celebrity, crime and power -- ping, ping and ping away at the emotional bull's-eye in our brains, giving us the urge to buy what we don't really need.

And all this because football is hostage to the entertainment industry, which is hostage to the advertising industry, which is funded by those who would enrich themselves at the expense of human and planetary health.

Did emperor George II fiddle with the Super Bowl while the world burned?