

Super Bowl 50: Will protesters disrupt game, events?

By [MATTHIAS GAFNI](#) | Bay Area News Group

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Super Bowl 50 and its constellation of events provide an opportunity to showcase the Bay Area to millions of tourists and television viewers, but it's that same worldwide attention that will likely draw protests and potential disruptions.

In light of a protest group's successful shutdown of the Bay Bridge on Monday, and previous transit-oriented takeovers of BART and local freeways, law enforcement plans to be vigilant and high-profile next month as the big game approaches. Super Bowls past have seen protests and picketing but never actions that have choked traffic and regional movement.

Meanwhile, activists in a region synonymous with fervent, and often times disruptive, protests have hinted at actions targeting the Super Bowl and its weeklong festivities.

"I would not be surprised considering our history in the Bay Area with police killings that there will be some actions," said Cephus "Bobby" Johnson, uncle of Oscar Grant, who was shot and killed by a BART police officer on New Year's Day 2009. "I'm behind any action that speaks to police terrorism. I'll always support something with respect to that."

Moments after activists with Black.Seed shut down the Bay Bridge on Monday — the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday — by chaining themselves and their cars to the new span, Johnson told marchers in Oakland: "We shut down the Bay Bridge and we will let everyone know, this Super Bowl, what the Bay Area is all about," according to the San Francisco Chronicle.

While the California Highway Patrol cleared that protest from the bridge within an hour, traffic backed up deep into the East Bay, and Officer Vu Williams said a similar traffic bottleneck would be much worse on busier days, such as Super Bowl Sunday.

“Certainly, we have concerns protesters will copycat this,” Williams said. That being said, “we’ve had no concrete threats for that,” he said.

The CHP plans to have maximum staffing and marked patrol cars in high-profile areas the week of the Super Bowl, particularly in key traffic locations such as the Bay Bridge, he said. Williams said he could not provide other operational specifics.

“While we recognize First Amendment rights, we don’t believe doing that on a freeway or bridge is the appropriate venue for that,” Williams said.

Mia Birdsong, an Oakland spokeswoman for Black.Seed, an offshoot of the Black Lives Matter movement, said she knows of no planned protest targeting the Super Bowl.

“We’ve had no conversations other than when reporters have asked us about it,” she said.

Cat Brooks, an Oakland resident and co-founder of the Anti-Police Terror Project, which frequently protests in the East Bay, said she could not confirm or deny any actions but would “be shocked if that weekend went by without a protest.”

“It would behoove organizers who want to get the message out about the atrocities happening to black and brown people to utilize that weekend when there will be so many people here from around the world,” she said.

Super Bowls and playoff games are no strangers to demonstrations.

At the 2012 Super Bowl in Indianapolis, Occupy groups protested Indiana’s new laws they believed hurt unions. At a number of past games, Native American activists have protested the Washington Redskins name and mascot, and the Westboro Baptist Church’s anti-gay protests have become fixtures at Super Bowls. In 2014, a 9/11 conspiracy theorist gained access to the media area and interrupted the postgame interview of a Seattle Seahawks player. And last year, at the NFL Championship in Glendale, Arizona, Black Lives Matter protesters released black balloons during the kickoff to protest police brutality.

So far, the only advertised protest planned for Super Bowl 50 is by Bloodstained Men & Their Friends objecting to circumcisions. The group, self-described “intactivists,” has protested at other high-profile venues while wearing white jumpsuits with red paint splattered on their crotches, plans to protest at the San Francisco Ferry Building on Feb. 6, and then Levi’s Stadium on Super Bowl Sunday.

“The NFL Super Bowl is the largest annual televised event in the United States, and our goal is to get some epic exposure,” the group wrote on its online sign-up page. “With hundreds of thousands of people at the event, and hundreds of millions of Americans watching it on TV, we aim to get the message of genital integrity and bodily autonomy to citizens across the country.”

While the group plans to draw attention to itself, including a woman dressed up as a bloody nurse, CEO Brian Herrity, of Concord, said members will not be chaining themselves to a bridge or freeway.

“No, not at all. We are a family-friendly, peaceful protest, and we abide by all the city laws,” he said “We’re not out there to obstruct traffic, although a lot of times people slow down when they see our costumes.”

As of Thursday, 29 people RSVP’d that they would participate in the protest.

Staff writer Matthew Artz contributed to this story. Contact Matthias Gafni at 925-952-5026. Follow him at [Twitter.com/mgafni](https://twitter.com/mgafni).



Matthias Gafni | Investigative reporter

Matthias Gafni is a Pulitzer Prize winning investigative reporter for the Bay Area News Group. He has reported and edited for Bay Area newspapers since he graduated from UC Davis, covering courts, crime, environment, science, child abuse, education, county and city government, and corruption. A Bay Area native, he loves his Warriors, Giants and 49ers. Send tips to 925-952-5026 or mgafni@bayareanewsgroup.com. Send him an encrypted text on Signal at 408-921-8719.

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