# Schmitt’s Telluric Partisan in American Entertainment Media: Fantasies of Resistance and Territorial Defense

Abstract: This article explores the political significance of the narratives of partisan warfare that appear in American popular culture. I draw on Carl Schmitt’s concept of the ‘telluric partisan’ – a figure that fights outside the normative boundaries of conventional war in defense of a homeland and the traditional identities that are rooted in it. These fantasies provide a sense of moral clarity, promote national unity, characterize enemy aggression, and glorify traditional values. They establish a readymade narrative that can be invoked to frame conflicts in terms of the heroic defense of an innocent and victimized people protecting themselves against foreigners and their dangerous ideologies. As I show, this call for popular engagement in war generally serves a conservative project of directing potentially revolutionary expressions of populism and vigilante justice into defense of family and the territorial *status quo*.

It is a familiar theme in books, movies, television shows, and videogames. The United States is under attack, and only a small group of irregular fighters can save it. These citizen-soldiers repel invaders or uncover terrorist plots. They defy enormous odds and win because of their determination, intimate knowledge of their home terrain, and willingness to do whatever it takes to win. From films like *Red Dawn*, *The Patriot*, and *White House Down*, to television shows like *Amerika* and *The Man in the High Castle*, to videogames like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, *Battlefield*, and *Homefront*, American popular media is preoccupied with the theme of defending the country against foreign incursions by resorting to the same kind of irregular warfare that is so often directed against American military forces operating abroad. My goal is to analyze the political significance of this narrative, both as it applies to the United States and as it reflects a more widespread interest in partisan warfare, which I understand as warfare that is conducted by irregular combatants who operate outside the norms of conventional interstate conflict.

As recent research on popular culture and security has shown, fictional representations of conflict help us conceptualize issues of security and give them a sense of concreteness.[[1]](#footnote-1) Popular culture is particularly important when it comes to identity formation, which is my focus here. It constructs friend-enemy relationships that sharpen divisions between in-groups and hostile out-groups, while constructing the identities of each.[[2]](#footnote-2) This builds on Dittmer’s insight that popular culture helps audiences develop a collective identity that maps onto political realities as a script[[3]](#footnote-3) In the case of partisan warfare in entertainment, the script articulates a nationalistic pride in the homeland and the importance of territorial integrity contrasted against foreignness and ideologies that threaten nationalism. I contribute to existing research on popular culture and identity formation by exploring the territorial dimension of this process, and in particular the construction of intense nationalism as a non-ideological perspective that is naturalized by virtue of being territorially embedded.

The narrative of defensive war against foreign threats is what I call a ‘telluric fantasy,’ borrowing the concept of telluric resistance that Carl Schmitt develops in his *Theory of the Partisan.[[4]](#footnote-4)* The word ‘telluric’ comes from the Latin *tellus* (earth) and means ‘of the earth.’ By labeling certain types of partisans ‘telluric,’ Schmitt signals that they are necessarily linked to a territory and that the defense of a homeland constitutes their identity. Schmitt shows how these fantasies clarify ambiguous security issues, assert the power of ordinary citizens to resist foreign threats, and legitimize violence. Telluric partisans are unconventional fighters operating outside of the norms of the Westphalian system, making a powerful claim about the importance of territorial identity as a rationale for fighting and legitimizing a vigilante approach to political violence. Although telluric fantasies assert the power of irregular fighters, they also affirm citizens’ domestic political impotence by suggesting that the scope of resistance must always be limited to the territorially conservative goal of expelling outsiders. Telluric fantasies claim greater authenticity than internationalist ideologies that appear as aggressive and false, while also naturalizing telluric violence by suggesting that links to family and home are not ideologically motivated. Applying Schmitt’s theory in this way reveals a double irony. First, American media promote the image of partisan resistance despite the country’s continual military interventions creating foreign partisans that it strives to delegitimize. Second, Schmitt’s admiration of telluric partisans rests heavily on his failure to consider how easily telluric fantasies lend themselves to xenophobia that works against his goal of defining enmity as a purely political relationship that does not presuppose other identities.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Telluric fantasies matter politically because of their role in constituting identities and the possibility that they may be activated as a call to arms capable of producing shared understandings of territorial defense against outsiders. Schmitt helps to reach this insight through his effort to show that politics is constituted by relations of enmity that are built upon collective beliefs and values.[[6]](#footnote-6) Telluric fantasies have been invoked to construct friend-enemy relations by nationalist militias guarding American borders, members of the Bush administration attempting to justify counterterrorism policies, and the Trump campaign in the 2016 US Presidential Election. The influence of telluric fantasies should not be gauged *causally* in terms of a direct influence on individuals’ actions but rather through 1) their *constitutive* role in forming identities that make people amenable to violent nationalism based on anti-foreign sentiments and 2) the logic of *appropriation* that is evident when political actors mobilize telluric fantasies for legitimacy. I therefore contend that telluric fantasies do not cause people’s actions but rather that they become the fodder that politicians and activists use for their own persuasive efforts. These fantasies are heterogeneous and open to interpretation – potentially even to subversive or ironic readings – yet they are often appropriated as rhetorical devices by extreme conservative causes.

Schmitt shows that telluric fantasies can be found cross-nationally and that they are at least as old as the Napoleonic Wars. My aim is to bring his ideas into research on popular culture by using American media as a case study. Telluric fantasies are not unique to the United States, but this is currently the most important expression of them for several reasons. First, American entertainment media has a large global audience and is therefore the focus of much of the existing research on popular culture and security. Second, these fantasies have a distinctive character in American entertainment, as partisans reveal an admiration for heroes operating covertly and with little accountability, though they are ostensibly defenders of fundamental democratic values. Third, the United States shows how partisan fantasies are taken up by real political actors, such as militias that patrol the border to deter illegal immigrants and politicians who decry ideologies that challenge telluric nationalism, including cosmopolitan acceptance of immigration or ‘radical Islamic terrorism.’

The first section of this article discusses the literature on popular culture and politics, devoting special attention to work on conceptions of enmity and processes of identity formation. Although this literature has yielded important insights, it focuses on the identity of soldiers fighting abroad and overlooks the meaning of partisans defending domestic spaces. The second section explains Schmitt’s theory of telluric partisan warfare. The rest of the article draws on prominent examples of telluric fantasies in American entertainment to explore four interrelated themes of partisan fantasies that reveal their political character.

# Constructing Heroes and Enemies in Foreign and Domestic Spaces

Fictional heroes often embody national identities,[[7]](#footnote-7) making the choice of heroes a decision about how the national identity will be constructed and what characteristics will be ascribed to it. The literature on popular culture and politics typically focuses on a particular type of hero as the national representative: the uniformed ‘professional Western warrior’ who serves as an ‘imperial functionary’ in the American empire.[[8]](#footnote-8) By many accounts, the ‘hero-ification’ of soldiers promotes militarism by glorifying military values and presenting war as an opportunity for personal and national advancement.[[9]](#footnote-9) The fictional American warriors are ‘super-soldiers, highly-skilled warriors,’[[10]](#footnote-10) and there is an ‘implied identification between U.S. soldiers and media audiences.’[[11]](#footnote-11) Hess argues that ‘the American soldier embodies fraternity, salvation, and technological might.’[[12]](#footnote-12) Boggs and Pollard characterize post-Vietnam heroes like Rambo as soldiers with an international orientation and a deep suspicion of the American population. [[13]](#footnote-13) As these examples illustrate, studies of popular culture have devoted considerable attention to the hero archetype of the American soldier and to how this figure enacts US foreign policy.

Much of the literature on friend-enemy relations in popular media borrows Stahl’s concept of the audience member as a ‘citizen-soldier’[[14]](#footnote-14) who imaginatively participates in wars, but the focus is usually on the latter half of that concept at the expense of the former. The emphasis is on audiences imagining themselves as soldiers (bringing the civilian identity into the military role), rather than the possibility of audience members experiencing fictions that militarize the civilian identity itself. The literature on the political significance of popular culture therefore includes some excellent work on American military interventionism, but without saying much about the meaning of fictional conflicts involving other types of actors. Fictional soldiers are important figures who deserve the scholarly attention they have received because they embody an imperialist ethos and show the projection of power into foreign spaces. However, partisan heroes demands special attention because they inhabit distinct geographical spaces (domestic rather than international), take different approaches to characterizing the friend-enemy relation that distinguishes members of the nation from ‘hostile foreigners,’ speak more directly to the identities of American civilian audiences, and envision conflicts that are radically different from those that the country actually engages in.

Research on geography in fictional representations of conflict calls attention to how the choice of settings shapes the actors involved and their conflicts. Dodds shows that spaces are not merely empty areas in which action occurs; they represent important concepts and affective links. He argues that spaces help to characterize conflicts and the identities of those who are fighting.[[15]](#footnote-15) Paasi argues that identities are often-territorially constituted; they do not simply exist but are grounded in a particular space.[[16]](#footnote-16) According to Herb,[[17]](#footnote-17) the processes of territorial differentiation and territorial bonding are integral to creating a sense of national identity. Finally, Edwardson[[18]](#footnote-18) notes that national identity is embodied through symbolic materialization, making otherwise abstract identities concrete. These processes serve much the same function as representations of the Other by demarcating groups and their identities with the help of geographical referents.

Just as the existing research tends to focus more on uniformed soldiers than on irregular combatants, it typically gives more attention to foreign spaces, and especially Orientalist themes, than it does to domestic spaces. Shaw charges military videogames with perpetuating orientalist stereotypes that help to rationalize imperialist projects.[[19]](#footnote-19) Similarly, Boggs and Pollard find that films represent the Middle East as ‘a quasi-mystical category largely outside of time and space, a ready source of dark fears and threats.’[[20]](#footnote-20) This, they argue, laid the foundation for the War on Terror by preparing Western audiences to see the Middle East as a threatening place that must be forcefully pacified. Robinson brings the analysis closer to home by commenting on American exceptionalism and its place in American culture, but even he persists in characterizing this in terms of media showing ‘“heroic troops” on the battlefield to deliver on the missionary potential of exceptionalist foreign policy.’[[21]](#footnote-21) This research on representations of foreign spaces is just as important as work on uniformed soldiers, yet it shares the same challenge of overshadowing the extent to which fictional conflicts are imagined taking place within domestic spaces that have a distinct political significance. Accounting for the role of popular culture in constructing security demands an effort to build on the research that has been directed at international conflicts to also consider how fictional citizen-soldiers operate domestically. The telluric partisan concept that I deploy in this paper overcomes these dual limitations of the literature by highlighting the political significance of irregular heroes and war in domestic spaces.

# Schmitt’s Theory of the Partisan

Carl Schmitt offers insight into the structure of partisan warfare and how fictional representations of partisans fuel real conflicts. This makes him well suited for theorizing the importance of the citizen-soldiers who have thus far been undertheorized in research on popular culture and security. Schmitt develops his theory of the partisan through a history of irregular warfare that extends from the Spanish *guerrilleros* who fought against Napoleon to the communist revolutionaries of the 1960s. He distinguishes between two types of fighters. Telluric partisans are defined by their attachment to a particular territory – a ‘relation to the soil [Boden], together with the autochthonous population and the geographical specificity of the country – mountains, forest, jungle, or desert.’[[22]](#footnote-22) They come into existence when their homeland is invaded and regular state military forces are unable to stop the foreign aggressor. Schmitt contrasts telluric partisans with what he calls the ‘aggressive international revolutionary activist’ who threatens state borders by attempting to propagate a universalist ideology.[[23]](#footnote-23) This figure appears in the guise of regular military forces that are exemplified by the armies of revolutionary France and revolutionary partisans that are exemplified by Leninism.

Aside from the telluric character, partisans share three traits that help to operationalize this concept when applying it to real or fictional fighters. First, partisans are irregular citizen-soldiers who are defined in opposition to regular state military forces. Partisans reject the conventions of war between states, especially the military uniform, and instead fight according to their own rules.[[24]](#footnote-24) Second, partisans have intense political commitments that imbue their violence with a deeper meaning than criminal violence. [[25]](#footnote-25) This is also the source of a heightened form of enmity that arises from the politicization of personal links to territory and kinship networks that personify territorial attachments. Finally, partisans’ knowledge of the home terrain allows them to be highly mobile and effective in combat[[26]](#footnote-26) Thus, partisans can be identified in popular media and distinguished from the soldier hero archetype through their irregularity, political attachments, and connection to a domestic space.

Schmitt alludes to the ideological importance of the partisan as an image or idea that may be real or fictional. Many of his examples of real partisans are coupled with comments about how their legacy was shaped by the artists and intellectuals who mediated their war effort or who constructed fictional heroes in their image. He says of the *guerrilleros* that they are largely figures of ‘myth and legend’ because information about them came not from the fighters themselves but from the ‘educated Francophiles who wrote books and memoirs.’[[27]](#footnote-27) He goes on to explain that the spread of partisan warfare against Napoleon was sustained by the ‘political myth (*Politischen Mythos*)’ of the *guerrilleros* defeating the French in Spain.[[28]](#footnote-28) Thus, Schmitt credits partisans with making it possible to deploy telluric fantasies capable of rallying the country and build morale during times of crisis. Partisans even have a touch of fantasy in Schmitt’s writings, as he romanticizes these fighters and credits them with the power to redeem the political at a time of crisis.[[29]](#footnote-29) He presents partisan warfare as the expression of a perennial attachment to territorial divisions that naturalize his own conservatism and agonistic conception of politics.

Telluric fantasies create readymade conflict maps that can be activated to explain ambiguous security threats, to issue calls for action, or to symbolize fundamental values that encourage national unity. Schmitt uses Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* as an example of how fictionalized partisans can be used to promote real violence. He contends that Tolstoy ‘elevates the Russian partisan of 1812 as bearer of the elementary forces of the Russian soil which shook off the great Kaiser Napoleon together with his illustrious army like a pesky insect.’[[30]](#footnote-30) Tolstoy creates a telluric fantasy to emphasize the power of ordinary Russian people, but the same partisan victory that became an inspiration for anarchists was invoked by the authoritarian Soviet State. ‘Stalin seized on this myth of indigenous national partisanship in World War II against Germany, turning it very concretely to the service of his communist world politics.’[[31]](#footnote-31) Stalin imagined his war as a telluric struggle because it was directed against a foreign invader, using this to sustain morale during the difficult winter of 1941 and thereafter to urge the Red Army onward as it carried a professedly telluric struggle into foreign countries. In this example Schmitt not only shows how the partisan fantasy perpetuated through culture can be appropriated but also demonstrates that it is extremely malleable and capable of advancing a range of different political programs. Partisans do not have an inherent political character or cause a particular political orientation but instead provide narratives that political actors can appropriate. Even more importantly, the example reveals that telluric justifications for war can all too easily become the basis for violence abroad – a particularly important acknowledgment for the American context.

In some instances partisans are real, in others they are myths build around real fighters, and in still others they are entirely fictional. Regardless of their grounding in reality, the image of the partisan takes on an affective truth in the sense of providing a cultural reference point for stabilizing insider vs outsider identities that can then be mobilized by political actors attempting to shore up support for real security policies. This helps to clarify how partisan myths in entertainment media have political significance. I deny that telluric fantasies *cause* a clear shift in mindset or a change in security policies in the real world, not least because they are heterogeneous and subject to multiple interpretations. Instead, I follow Grayson in thinking that ‘Popular cultural artefacts can reveal the approaches, interpretations and assumptions that underpin understandings of politics and what we believe to be political in the first place.’[[32]](#footnote-32) Telluric fantasies construct politics according to Schmittean friend-enemy relations and provide a body of material that can be appropriated into political ideologies. Thus, Schmitt not only provides a helpful theoretical framework for resolving a gap in the literature on popular culture and security when it comes to conflict in domestic spaces but also helps to explain why popular culture matters without making dubious claims about it causing people to act in a particular way.

# The Four Central Themes of Telluric Fantasies

The following sections explore four of the central themes in telluric fantasies, focusing on how these construct the identity of the Americans who are framed as defenders of the homeland. First I look at the veneration of primordial attachments to the land and family in partisan fantasies, which politicizes personal relationships by linking self-defense to national defense. The following section explores the territorial conservatism of telluric narratives, paying special attention to how domestic spaces are envisioned as sources of power that are contained within existing political boundaries. Next I argue that telluric narratives glorify sacrifice while also condemning as inauthentic members of the nation who avoid fighting. The last section assesses the perceived threat from universalistic values that conflict with nationalistic orientations, emphasizing how telluric violence is presented as being natural and beyond ideology.

# *Defenders of Primordial Attachments*

Telluric fantasies appear in dozens of American movies, television shows, books, and videogames – media that are frequently identified as being important sites for constructing conceptions of security.[[33]](#footnote-33) Many of the heroes are ordinary people who are compelled to fight by an existential threat that cannot be defused peacefully or defended against by regular state security forces. Others are members of elite law enforcement or military organizations who operate beyond military chains of command, without wearing uniforms or abiding by the strictures of military discipline. In either case, the heroes are depicted as reluctant combatants who have intensely personal reasons for fighting. They are *forced to fight* by virtue of a foreign threat to their primordial attachments. This self-defense motive reflects a sense in which the country being invaded is itself envisaged as an innocent victim in the same narratives. The United States’ own history of foreign intervention – as well as the simulation of foreign intervention recurs in popular culture – is effaced and innocence regained at the moment the borders are breached by hostile outsiders. The heroes become synechdoches for the country as a whole and embody what Hughes calls the ‘cult of innocence’[[34]](#footnote-34) – the persistent narrative that the United States is the victim of unwarranted attacks and that it does nothing to provoke violence.

Perhaps the most famous example of a film engaging in telluric fantasy is *Red Dawn* (1984), which tells the story of an invasion of the Southwestern United States by the Soviet Union and its Latin American allies. The US government is unable to defend against the attack and allows a third of the country to fall under enemy control. The protagonists are high school students who escape the invasion by fleeing to the mountains and initiating a guerrilla war. The 2012 remake of *Red Dawn* follows roughly the same story as the original – ordinary American teenagers taking up arms to protect their country– and affirms the same message that defensive warfare waged by irregular fighters who deviate from the conventions of war is the only way of saving the country.

The television series *The Man in the High Castle* (2015-) imagines an alternative history of the United States that is divided by a Germany and Japan that succeeded in winning the Second World War. The two central characters become involved in the resistance against Nazi and Japanese overlords of the United for personal reasons. Juliana Crain because her half-sister is killed and John Smith because of his love for Juliana. As in the other examples, personal relationships embody a sense of natural solidarity that unifies the domestic space. Other Americans, including Juliana’s own father, are accused of being traitors for failing to resist the occupiers and even facilitating their control. A similar narrative persists throughout many popular engagements with the War on Terror. *United 93* (2006) is one of the most interesting examples, as it is a fictionalized account of the real incident in which passengers onboard that flight attacked the hijackers who captured the plane on 9/11. The film emphasizes the power of ordinary people by using relatively unknown actors as well as real pilots, flight attendants, and air traffic controllers.[[35]](#footnote-35) The Americans’ heroism is even contrasted against the cowardice of a German passenger, who attempts to prevent a confrontation with the hijackers. Made for television films about United Airlines Flight 93, such as *The Flight that Fought Back* and *Flight 93*, repeat this story of ordinary people resisting the hijackers.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The films *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013) and *White House Down* (2013) both tell the story of a foreign attack on the White House that proceeds according to the telluric structure. In the former, North Korean operatives hope to pressure the US to abandon the Korean peninsula, but are thwarted by a Secret Service agent. In the latter, a lone Capitol Police Officer protects the president and America’s nuclear weapons from a paramilitary organization. In both cases, the protagonist is a law enforcement officer who acts largely autonomously and is able to outfight dozens of enemies with the help of a detailed knowledge of the White House. That is to say, the protagonist is a lone man who becomes a non-uniformed combatant defending his home terrain. The videogame *Call of Duty*: *Ghosts* focuses on an invasion of the US by an alliance of South American states, while *Black Ops II* simulates an attack by terrorists armed with drones, and *Advanced Warfare* tells the story of private military contractors who are headquartered in Baghdad seizing control of America. In each case, players reprise the role of special operatives or former soldiers who are irregular combatants that must liberate their homeland from foreign tyranny via unconventional battles set in iconic American locations in San Francisco, Las Vegas, and Detroit.

The personal nature of conflict in domestic spaces is manifest by enemies capturing the heroes’ family members, as they do in *Red Dawn* and *White House Down*, killing family members, as they do in the films about Flight 93 and *Ghosts,* or destroying the heroes’ homes, as they do in *Ghosts* and *Black Ops II*. The citizen-soldiers are then forced to fight because of an attack on kin and home. This confirms Schmitt’s point that, in true nationalistic fashion, invaded spaces are envisioned as being the natural property of a particular group of people held together by close attachments that are supposed to embody a natural solidarity. Attacks on the heroes’ families and homes politicize these by transforming them into the motive for waging war.[[37]](#footnote-37) Telluric warfare therefore represents a radical endorsement of the idea that ‘the personal is political.’ However, this politicization comes by way of militarizing spaces of ordinary life and identifying them as potential sites of conflict.[[38]](#footnote-38) That is to say, it is a politicization arising out of enmity and that depends on a sense of threat from hostile outsiders.

Partisans take it upon themselves to determine who their enemies are without being directed by the state, which is to say, without being led by established political authorities. As Schmitt says of the Spanish *guerrilleros*, ‘the salient point of the Spanish partisan’s situation in 1808 was that he took the risk of fighting on his home soil [*Heimatboden*], while his own king and the royal family hadn’t yet decided who the real enemy was.’[[39]](#footnote-39) This kind of decision about when to wage war and against whom constitutes a serious challenge to state authority. Partisan warfare ‘shows that under some circumstances the state no longer has the monopoly of naming the enemy.’[[40]](#footnote-40) Primordial attachments that are rooted in the home territory supersede other group loyalties and even obedience to the state.

The political importance of telluric fantasies is best appreciated not by looking for a clear causal influence but rather by noticing how these narratives are appropriated by political actors seeking legitimacy and the role they play in larger projects of constituting the identities of those people who see themselves engaged in a real-life struggle to protect their own primordial attachments from foreign threats. Telluric fantasies are routinely taken up by militia organizations and gun activists, who claim that the government fails to provide security and that they must do so on their own initiative. For these people the image of citizen-soldiers bearing arms ‘represents the final bulwark against an imagined political tyranny that one day will come boiling down our streets’ and a ‘fear of superheated minorities who will stop at nothing short of savage rampage to grab a bigger piece of the action.’[[41]](#footnote-41) Telluric fantasies do not cause these groups to form, yet they provide a heroic conception of self-defense against foreign aggression for activists seeking to cultivate a sense of threat that can normalize the militarized border and justify the need for citizens to act outside of state authority.[[42]](#footnote-42) As Doty points out, ‘Civilian border groups have arisen within a social and political context that has enabled them to blossom and gain a significant degree of legitimacy.’[[43]](#footnote-43) And as a repository of commonsense understandings of politics and security issues,[[44]](#footnote-44) popular culture offers an ideal source from which to borrow.

The militia and gun rights movements in the United States show how the appeal to telluric legitimacy depends on invoking the sanctity of a protected space and family relations that must be defended against hostile outsiders. The militia group American Border Patrol, for example, acts on its belief that illegal immigration constitutes an ‘invasion’ and a ‘Second Mexican-American War’ by conducting patrols along the border, operating surveillance drones, and advocating on behalf of anti-immigration politicians.[[45]](#footnote-45) This suggests that Schmitt’s hope of partisans redeeming political relations of enmity may be thwarted by the telluric fantasy’s incorporation into what Žižek characterizes as ‘the violent emergence of depoliticized ‘pure Evil’ in the guise of ‘excessive’ ethnic or religious fundamentalist violence.’[[46]](#footnote-46) The rhetoric surrounding gun rights is equally dependent on telluric framing, as one of the central claims is that guns are essential for allowing ordinary people to defend their homes and families. Appealing to the threat of attack against family members and home, advocates of expansive gun ownership imagine ordinary people being empowered to provide for their own defense and consistently being justified in the use of force because of this ostensibly benevolent motive.[[47]](#footnote-47)

# *Territorial Protection and Conservatism*

The telluric partisan’s ‘mode of existence and style of warfare exploit his intimate and seemingly instinctive knowledge of his homeland and its geographical idiosyncrasies – its mountains, forests, jungles, or deserts.’[[48]](#footnote-48) Spatial knowledge is essential for victory and an affirmation that the land truly belongs to the telluric partisans by virtue of their ability to use it effectively. The videogames *Homefront* (2011) and *Homefront: Revolution* (2016) closely resemble the *Red Dawn* films, especially in terms of how the domestic space becomes a source of power. The series is set in a future United States that is weakened by an oil shortage, then invaded by North Korea. As is so often the case in telluric fantasies, the games invoke the link between territory and great American landmarks. The original game primarily takes place in the mountains of Colorado and the iconic Golden Gate Bridge. The sequel features the even less subtle effort to retake Philadelphia, birthplace of the American Revolution. The choice of settings is a symbolic affirmation of the authenticity of the resistance movement – a claim about the authority the irregular fighters have to protect the country when the government is powerless to do so.

The games in the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series have been some of the most commercially successful videogames ever produced, with around 40 million active players who have logged over 1.6 billion hours of online play.[[49]](#footnote-49) The series’ second and third installments tell the story of a Russian invasion of Maryland, Virginia, and New York. In *Modern Warfare 2* (2009), the Russian attack on Washington D.C. is only halted by rogue special operatives who detonate a nuclear bomb in the atmosphere, which disables the Russian military’s weapons. In *Modern Warfare 3* (2011) players fight through the streets of New York as special operatives who are disavowed by their home states. The *Modern Warfare* series explicitly references *Red Dawn*, such as by naming a mission after the films’ fictional partisan group the Wolverines, and follows those films in creating an unconstrained war to eject foreign invaders.

Telluric fantasies give the impression that individuals have unfathomable power simply by virtue of their mastery of the homeland. This fighting prowess gives partisans revolutionary potential, yet Schmitt contends that the potential goes unrealized because of partisans’ conservative commitment to preserving territorial integrity and primordial kinship attachments. Partisans are political actors, but their political commitments are one-dimensional; they lack substantive goals aside from protecting their home territory and identities that are grounded in it. They challenge the state monopoly on the use of violence, but forgo the opportunity to make any significant political changes beyond protecting the state’s boundaries and asserting nationalism.

One of the reasons why Schmitt’s theory is so helpful when analyzing telluric fantasies is that it can explain why partisans might be attractive to traditionalists ranging from Schmitt himself to contemporary American conservatives. Schmitt’s esteem for telluric partisans has much to do with his conservatism and his insistence on the terrestrial roots of political order.[[50]](#footnote-50) As Hooker points out, telluric partisans ‘represent a political disposition that Schmitt clearly wishes to cast as authentic and admirable.’[[51]](#footnote-51) The authenticity of partisans, for Schmitt as well as in popular culture, comes from their deeply personal reasons for fighting – the politicization and militarization of their lives.

Telluric fantasies are heterogeneous and open to competing interpretations. There is revolutionary potential in the narrative of popular resistance, yet Schmitt is careful to steer the concept in a conservative direction. He tends to describe telluric partisans in romantic terms, especially when discussing their political import. ‘The partisan is portrayed as a possible redeemer of the political, who knows his concrete enemies and demonstrates a willingness to kill and to risk his own status.’[[52]](#footnote-52) As vessels of the national spirit who come into being at a moment of crisis, partisans carry with them a hope of renewal and rebirth – an imaginative return to the national virtues that were lost or in decline.

Telluric fantasies not only participate in constructing heroic identities for the partisans but also characterize those who fail to partake in the collective defense by setting these groups in opposition to each other. The television mini-series *Amerika* (1987) closely parallels the *Red Dawn* films. Set a decade after a successful Soviet invasion of America, it focuses on the challenges of subjecting the country to foreign control and ends with a partisan uprising led by the people of ‘Heartland,’ one of the administrative regions the country is divided into. The series critiques the American public’s lack of commitment to the war against the Soviet Union, which is cited as the reason for the country’s downfall, yet it suggests that this moral failing could be overcome as the partisans attempt to start a Second American Revolution. It is significant that the revolution, like the resistance campaigns depicted in *Red Dawn*, arises from America’s heartland, which is explicitly identified by that name - a place that is the imagined repository of the American spirit and the virtues that are embedded in the country’s geography. *The Man in the High Castle* likewise emphasizes the threatening totalitarian ideas of the foreign occupiers and counters these with a resistance movement based in Colorado, which is yet again the country’s metaphorical heartland.

Protecting the ‘real America’ of the heartland from foreigners and inauthentic Americans is a central theme of contemporary American conservatism, as evidenced by books from conservative commentators like *The Real America: Messages from the Heart and Heartland* and *Revolt From the Heartland: The Struggle for an Authentic Conservatism*.[[53]](#footnote-53) Conservative commentators rely on this framing device to link territorial defense to primordial attachments and conservative values, much as Schmitt himself does, bringing their rhetoric into alignment with popular culture archetypes to create mutually-reinforcing rhetorical frames of the threats to US national security. Light points out that ‘[t]he defensively armed citizen has become, in some quarters, the paragon of patriotism,’[[54]](#footnote-54) and that ‘celebratory depictions of armed citizens’ in popular culture are integral to building this sense of authentic American self-defense. Telluric narratives make it possible to build a sense of existential threat against the homeland even when these are absent from real current events and to imaginatively enact an unfailing devotion to the homeland. Therefore, situating conflicts not only in foreign spaces constructed according to orientalist narratives but also in domestic settings that militarize everyday life is essential to bringing conflict home and legitimizing efforts to purify the country from within.

# *Celebrations of Sacrifice*

Self-sacrifice is one of the most prominent virtues shared by partisans in entertainment media. The heroes are invariably prepared to ‘die for their country,’ and in many instances they do. Telluric fantasies typically feature at least one central character who performs a sacrifice to ensure victory. The passengers onboard United Airlines Flight 93 crash their plane to prevent it from being used in another terrorist attack. Both *Red Dawn* films include a moment when a partisan leaves the group to perform a suicide mission. Videogames take this one step further, with the *Call of Duty* series repeatedly allowing players to take control of special operatives in their dying blaze of glory. The sacrifice simultaneously affirms the immense value of the cause for fighting and the nobility of the individuals who take up arms. As Bargu points out, the partisan who sacrifices himself is an especially potent ideological weapon. ‘Conventional political power seems to falter in the face of those who take the power over life and death into their own hands and do not fear dying sacrificial deaths. Each fighter's body . . . becomes a new and sacralized arena in which different demands for sovereignty are fought out.’[[55]](#footnote-55) He goes on to explain that ‘[s]acrifice calls upon a rich tradition of theological and theoretical interpretation in which the sacred and the relationship to the sacred imbue acts of violence with meaning.’[[56]](#footnote-56) When it comes to telluric fantasies, the sacred meaning is a conception of the national spirit that is activated by the appearance of an existential threat to the territory in which the national spirit is rooted and made concrete. Mobilizing this conception of sacrifice emphasizes the natural innocence of the partisan and reveals why conservatives would be attracted to narratives that celebrate ordinary people giving their lives to preserve the sanctity of national borders.

Throughout *Theory of the Partisan* Schmitt finds instances of military strategists, artists, and intellectuals using telluric fantasies to advance their political or military interests. For example, Schmitt argues that Chinese partisans did this during their country’s civil war and that Vietnamese partisans followed suit in their anticolonial wars against France, in each case mobilizing cultural tropes to inspire ‘people’s wars.’[[57]](#footnote-57) He finds that the partisan ideal rationalizing complete devotion to the homeland is so profound that it compels acts of self-sacrifice to restore boundaries and give substance to the national identity.[[58]](#footnote-58) The ease with which partisan enemies can shift is further confirmed by the examples I discussed, such as reframing *Red Dawn* to be about a North Korean invasion or manufacturing new threats from a hypothetical Latin American alliance in *Call of Duty: Ghosts*.

American media perpetuate the telluric fantasy at a time when it is routinely the foreign invader and its enemies often bear closer resemblance to the telluric resistance fighters. This has been especially clear throughout the War on Terror. ‘By defining members of a non-telluric global net- work as enemy combatants, the US claimed the right to target such individuals wherever they were in the world.’[[59]](#footnote-59) The Bush administration cast the War on Terror as a strange sort of preventative global telluric struggle of ‘fighting them over there so we don’t have to fight them here’ [[60]](#footnote-60) – a contradiction based on Schmitt’s theory, but one that gains an aura of plausibility from the sheer volume of entertainment media showing threats to the country’s territorial integrity. This was evident from the first days of the conflict when President Bush drew support from the telluric heroes of Flight 93, such as by quoting the line ‘let’s roll’ [[61]](#footnote-61) that was used before the passengers attempted to retake the aircraft and invoking their spirit of self-sacrifice as a model for the country as a whole. The incident and its remediation in popular entertainment helped to construct the ‘angel patriots’ [[62]](#footnote-62) who were vital for transforming the friend-enemy binary into absolute enmity between good and evil that continues to influence the characterization of terrorism. Thus, the threat of terrorism within domestic spaces creates a pretext for foreign interventions – the telluric fantasy becomes a fear that helps to legitimize international warfare extending far beyond Schmitt’s romantic ideal.

Public opinion is invariably divided when it comes to war. At least as far back as the Second World War, the American public has disagreed about when wars are justified and how they should be waged.[[63]](#footnote-63) There was substantial opposition to the campaign against Communism during the Cold War,[[64]](#footnote-64) and later to the policies of the War on Terror.[[65]](#footnote-65) The United States is never unanimous in its opposition to enemies, and its capriciousness can be disheartening for those who hope that a ‘rally around the flag’ will produce national unity. Telluric fantasies, like real partisan warfare, reveal ‘an attempt to clarify the declaration of enmity as a real, concrete, imaginable and autonomous act.’[[66]](#footnote-66) They offer a sense of legitimacy and purpose during morally ambiguous wars. Telluric wars are limited wars in pursuit of clearly defined objectives – objectives that are embodied in the terrain of combat. They have clear beginnings in the violation of territorial integrity and conclude when that integrity is restored. They are defensive struggles waged by people with no inclination or desire to use violence beyond what is necessary for self-defense. This makes it possible to preserve the image that ‘America is open, innocent, and law-abiding,’[[67]](#footnote-67) while still being prepared to rally and defeat any foreign threats that lack these moral qualities. Telluric warfare is typically represented as absolving the defensive fighters of any guilt for the violence they employ. ‘Combat is justified as a battle of self-defense that ‘sanctifies every means’, even the unleashing of total disorder.’[[68]](#footnote-68)

Telluric fantasies offer the illusion of unlimited justification for violence, feeding efforts to make Americans appear as ethical warriors.[[69]](#footnote-69) In *Red Dawn*, this allows the partisans to rationalize indiscriminate attacks and executions. In *Modern Warfare* it even motivates the detonation of a nuclear bomb within the United States. However it is enacted, violence is presented as essential for protecting the country and best carried out by shadowy irregular forces that can escape normal mechanisms of political accountability. Normalizing preemptive defensive violence as the appropriate response to territorial infractions contributes to the ‘culture of impunity’[[70]](#footnote-70) that has existed throughout the War on Terror, which seeks to legitimize American violence as being an inherently defensive response to terrorist attacks striking within the country’s borders.

Telluric fantasies likewise provide some guidance about how to respond to the new political reality that comes into being once the territorial status quo has been violated. Hooker argues that Schmitt’s fascination with the partisan arises from his sense that this figure might hold the key to some kind of new mode of politics that exists in the aftermath of the Westphalian system’s collapse and in opposition to any prospective global political order that could subsume states.[[71]](#footnote-71) The same tone is evident in the telluric partisans that appear in popular media. They affirm the power of the local over the global, the importance of traditional identities based on familial relationships and a sense of spatial belonging, and a confidence that territorial boundaries will continue to be protected in the future. They provide reassurance that moments of vulnerability will be replaced with renewed certainty in the homeland and the identity that is grounded in it.

# *The Threat of Foreign Universalism*

Schmitt sees friend-enemy relations of enmity as the defining characteristic of politics. His early work focuses on *conventional enmity*, which is a relationship between opponents that recognize each other’s legitimacy, as exemplified by interstate warfare under the Westphalian system. Partisans threaten conventional enmity by operating outside of that system and the norms that govern warfare between states.[[72]](#footnote-72) They produce *real enmity* by defying conventions of war and fighting with total devotion to personal goals, such as the protection of family and home. The telluric partisan’s enemy is the international revolutionary, which expresses *absolute enmity* - pure hatred unconstrained by geographical boundaries. This enmity results from the uncompromising political ideologies that international revolutionaries support, which are global in scope and recognize no possibility of reconciliation or the coexistence of different ways of life in separate territories.[[73]](#footnote-73) These are ‘revolutionary,’ he argues, not in a progressive sense but in their aspiration to disrupt the territorial *status quo*.

The enemies in telluric fantasies come in countless forms, including state military forces, criminals, drug cartels, terrorists, or any number of other violent actors that may encroach on the sacred homeland. Whatever they are, the enemies are constructed as being motivated by *absolute* enmity. They are aggressive outsiders attempting to erase existing borders. Many are communists who come from the Soviet Union, Latin America, China, or North Korea. They invade the United States to incorporate it into a new global order and seek to not only assert control over it but to fundamentally change its politics and society. The universalistic ideologies are made concrete through their violation of a clearly defined geographical space, which shows that ‘the distinction between friend and enemy is clearer and more understandable when it is tied to geography and space.’[[74]](#footnote-74) Telluric fantasies share Schmitt’s anxiety about universalism and manifest it to create battles of ideas.

Most commentators read *Red Dawn* as a piece of propaganda that exemplifies conservative fears about the spread of communism.[[75]](#footnote-75) Ryan and Kellner say that it is ‘perhaps the most audacious anticommunist film of the era.’[[76]](#footnote-76) According to them, the movie’s underlying message is that Americans must do whatever is necessary to defeat the Soviet Union, even abandoning liberal democratic values. This is an apt reading, yet it is important to push this point further. *Red Dawn* not only reflects fears about the spread of communism but also a more general anxiety about external threats to the country’s territorial integrity – especially when those threats come from outsiders adhering to universalist ideologies that are inherently threatening to the idea of a safe homeland.

Communists hold special appeal in American telluric fantasies because of the Cold War legacy. They are familiar enemies that provide a clear focal point for anxieties about security. They are also enduring enemies that make it possible to continue Cold War narratives not simply out of nostalgia but out of genuine fears that communism may still undermine American power. This is clear from the post-Cold War shift from Soviet enemies to Chinese and North Korean enemies. As the *Red Dawn* films illustrate, nearly identical narratives can be invoked against the changing face of communism, making it possible to preserve a familiar way of framing threats over decades of fictional speculation about America's next great war. The resurgence of Russian military power over the past decade has even made it possible to recycle fears of a Soviet invasion of Europe and the United States, as evidenced by the *Modern Warfare* videogames.

Terrorists are usually depicted as having the same type of universalistic ideologies as communists while also being more threatening and elusive because they embrace the partisan way of war themselves, albeit without the telluric orientation. They launch invisible invasions and strike without warning, confirming fears about the country’s vulnerability following 9/11. Texts that show terrorist enemies focus on conflict between two different styles of irregular warfare. However, the result is largely the same as when states are the enemy. Telluric fantasies imagine that only irregular forces who operate without accountability or institutional constraints possess the unique ability to rally the nation in defense of the homeland. These enemies help to further elevate the partisan heroes that symbolize the national spirit and resilience by providing overwhelming threats that the partisans can nevertheless overcome within the confines of fictional narratives that reassure audiences that resistance is always possible.

Fear of any ideologies that conflict with telluric nationalism, regardless of their exact content, helps to explain why partisan fantasies persist even as the nature of the enemy and the enemy’s ideology change. The pervasiveness of telluric narratives directed against radically different types of enemies also highlights the limited concern for what is actually motivating enemies. They are opponents merely because they and their ideas are hostile and foreign, so there is no need for a more serious effort to understand why they fight. What we find in narratives of telluric warfare is a symbolic distancing of enemies by simplifying them to the point that they only have an identity by virtue of their oppositional character within an outsider vs insider binary. [[77]](#footnote-77)

Donald Trump’s 2016 election campaign shows the usefulness of the partisan fantasy when politicians appropriate it. Throughout his campaign, Trump and his supporters cultivated a telluric spirit of national pride, seeing themselves not only as true Americans but as more authentic protectors of heartland values than ‘liberal elites.’ They celebrated their anti-establishment status by carrying weapons openly, threatening protestors, and even organizing activists to monitor polling places on Election Day.[[78]](#footnote-78) The image of vigilante justice became even more extreme with calls to imprison political opponents and thinly veiled threats of violence if Trump lost. Trump and his supporters imagined the impotence of state security forces and the necessity of establishing themselves as the country’s real protectors, though in accordance with telluric fantasies, they claimed to be doing this only for the sake of returning the country to a more authentic and natural state of affairs.

As Schmitt would predict, foreign ideologies helped to build this sense of solidarity among Trump’s supporters. In particular, the campaign stoked fears of cosmopolitanism promoting open borders, China’s expansionism, and ‘radical Islamic terrorism.’ The importance of these concepts – and of the act of simply entrenching friend-enemy relations by naming these enemies – was revealed by Trump’s continual condemnations of President Obama and others who have attempted to defuse hostilities by refusing to reify them with simplistic labels. The imagery of foreign invasion and resistance by nationalistic citizen-soldiers permeated the campaign. At times the language even borrowed explicitly from telluric fantasies in popular media. For example, the bestselling conservative writer Ann Coulter’s book on Trump proclaims that ‘Americans are slaughtered not by invading Soviet troops, *Red Dawn* style, but by Islamic terrorists’ and that ‘Americans are raped and murdered not by the Red Army but by millions of illegal aliens waltzing across our wide-open border.’[[79]](#footnote-79) Dozens of conservative websites likewise issued conspiratorial speculations about the country being invaded and celebrated popular activism as the solution.[[80]](#footnote-80) The rhetoric displays the real enmity of people who feel the looming presence of a foreign threat that could steal their way of life by breaching America’s territorial integrity.

Of course, telluric fantasies are open to divergent interpretations and even to subversive readings. The Trump administration’s links to Russia have raised concerns from those on the left, as well as moderate conservatives, that the country could be facing a new kind of invasion. This raises the prospects of new conceptions of telluric resistance borrowing from the same texts. One reporter even uses the series *Amerika* as a way of understanding Russian influence and the decay of American democracy.[[81]](#footnote-81) The prospect of foreign influence in the highest ranks of government presents an opportunity for a re-appropriation of some texts that have long been associated with conservative xenophobia in pursuit of a progressive and potentially universalist perspective that would contravene Schmitt’s claims of what partisan warfare should embody.

# Conclusion

Telluric partisans are paradoxical figures. They take on the authority to wage war when regular state military forces fail, yet they protect the state’s borders and allow the state to survive by deviating from the conventions that are supposed to govern regular armed forces. They have revolutionary potential, but they direct it towards preserving the *status quo*. They are easily romanticized because they operate according to their own rules, embody the national will, and seem to be solely concerned with defense, but they also represent a radical intensification of war, uncompromising nationalism, and blind hostility toward outsiders. In some instances, such as with the Trump campaign’s victory in 2016, the anti-establishment vigilante pursuit of security can even be appropriated to legitimize a new political establishment that internalizes the fears of invasion and reinscribes the nation-state.[[82]](#footnote-82) As I have shown, Schmitt’s partisan theory helps to call attention to the defining characteristics of the telluric ideal while also showing how the image of partisan warfare persists in fiction and can be appropriated by political actors.

Despite its analytical utility, Schmitt’s theory is problematic insofar as it generally promotes the efforts of telluric partisans. Schmitt’s praise for them offers insight into why a conservative would find these figures attractive, yet it also indicates the importance of going beyond Schmitt and developing a more critical perspective on the meaning of telluric fantasies. With this in mind I have emphasized the necessity of being alert to the conservatism of telluric fantasies and the extent to which this framing masks the complexities of international relations behind a simplistic outsider vs insider binary. It is likewise important to be aware of the features of this narrative that Schmitt leaves out, such its gendered dimensions or how Schmitt’s hopes for restoring political enmity are threatened by post-political racial motivations.

Efforts to legitimize the War on Terror suggest that Schmitt may be right and demonstrates these fantasies’ utility for those urging the country to war, rationalizing objectionable security practices, and urging greater unity. Narratives of telluric resistance have been particularly attractive as a way of providing substance to a struggle that is largely defined by abstractions, such as religious ideologies, risk calculations, and the ever-contentious concept of terrorism itself. Thus, Schmitt’s assessment of the strength of primordial attachments, especially the attachment to territory, remain as true as ever. Even in the twenty-first century, in an era in which security is often characterized in terms of the ‘novel’ threat of terrorism and the radical departure from pre-9/11 optimism, ‘the partisan still signifies a patch of true home soil; he is one of the last sentries of earth, as a not yet completely destroyed world-historical element.’[[83]](#footnote-83)

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75. Harvey Roy Greenberg, ‘Dangerous Recuperations: Red Dawn, Rambo, and the New Decaturism,’ *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 15, no.2 (1987), 60-70; Harvey Roy Greenberg, *Screen Memories: Hollywood Cinema on the Psychoanalytic Couch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Ben Dickenson, *Hollywood’s New Radicalism: War, Globalisation, and the Movies from Reagan to George W. Bush* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd, 2006); Eric Lichtenfeld, *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988),p.213. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. This confirms one of the most consistent findings across research on the politics of popular culture: that enemies are only shallow caricatures, see: Hess, ‘You Don't Play, You Volunteer’; Holland, ‘When you think of the Taleban, think of the Nazis’; Van Veeren, ‘Interrogating 24’; Robertson Allen, ‘The Unreal Enemy of America's Army,’ *Games and Culture* 6, 1 (2011):38-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Lois Beckett and Oliver Laughland, ‘Specter of election day violence looms as Trump spurs vigilante poll watchers ‘ *The Guardian* 5 November, (2016) https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/05/election-day-violence-donald-trump-poll-watchers. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ann Coulter, *In Trump We Trust: E Pluribus Awesome!* (Sentinel, 2016), p.73. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. For examples, see: <http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2015/08/19/it_s_an_invasion_not_immigration>; <http://allnewspipeline.com/Red_Dawn_Invasion_Begins.php>; http://www.wnd.com/2016/11/trump-and-the-islamic-invasion-of-the-west/ [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Bill Scher, ‘The 1987 TV Miniseries That Predicted a Russian Takeover of America,’ Politico January 7, 2017. http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/01/the-1987-tv-miniseries-that-predicted-a-russian-takeover-of-america-214609 [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. I would like to thank the editors for pointing out this way of reading the Trump victory. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Ibid.,pp.49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)