



PRESS RELEASE

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VVA Releases Massive Report On Foreign Entities Targeting Veterans Online

(Washington, D.C.)— Today Vietnam Veterans of America made public the results of a two-year investigation into foreign entities targeting servicemembers, veterans, and their families online. VVA's 191-page document, posted at vva.org/trollreport, details how foreign trolls target the military and veterans community for the purposes of sowing discord in our democracy, perpetrating financial fraud, and spreading anti-American propaganda. The report also includes evidence of election interference regarding the 2020 election cycle similar to that which the Russians engaged in during 2016.

“Vietnam veterans, likely, remember the Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) program, the psychological operation campaign of our war — with leaflets strewn from the air into enemy-controlled areas and messages delivered via bullhorn from helicopters,” said John Rowan, VVA National President. “Today’s version of psychological warfare, as VVA’s Kristofer Goldsmith details in *An Investigation Into Foreign Entities Targeting Servicemembers and Veterans Online*, is broadcast through the internet into our homes through our personal computers. Hostile forces have and continue to infiltrate our families and communities. This insidious attack on our democracy is a serious national security threat that continues to go without check. We must act to stop this interference now.”

VVA’s report documents foreign entities’ persistent and pervasive efforts to infiltrate and influence the military and veterans community. Individual servicemembers and veterans, including those who have been elected to Congress, are being imitated online so that their identities and personal stories can be leveraged in so-called “romance scams.” These foreign online predators use these imposter accounts to frequent forums and social media groups dedicated to Gold Star Families so that they can prey on Americans who have recently lost a loved one.

Foreign cybercriminals have also falsely represented themselves as VVA employees, tricking our supporters into giving away sensitive financial information on the premise that they’re offering jobs to help fundraise for VVA. VVA’s trademark has been infringed upon both in these types of fraud schemes, as well as to sell counterfeit merchandise that’s advertised as being sold to “help veterans.”

VVA has found these foreign entities to be both sophisticated and dedicated to targeting American troops and veterans. In order to add credibility to their imposter social media accounts, they often create websites that plagiarize legitimate news relevant to veterans, as well as create original content related to veterans' benefits.

Foreign trolls have created pages that represent fake VSOs on social media, both stealing from real VSOs trusted logos, and creating their own unique branding. VVA found that these foreign admins also run private Facebook groups specifically targeting disabled veterans, which they then use to disseminate divisive political content.

VVA analyzed the Russian ads released by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, and found at least 113 ads that were targeted at, or related to servicemembers and veterans. Of those 113 ads, the millions of social-media followers of 5 major congressionally chartered VSOs, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and a host of other reputable veterans organizations were specifically included in the Russians' targeting criteria. The content used in these ads was often meant to divide Americans against one another based on identity or beliefs. At least one veteran who is currently a candidate for president in the 2020 election had their military service and personal story used in one of these Russian ads.

In early 2019, foreign trolls from Macedonia stole a Facebook page from a group of veterans supporting a presidential candidate for the 2020 election. The Macedonians then used this Facebook page to engage in election interference, promoting one presidential candidate while attacking others. These foreign trolls also tricked followers of this veteran-focused political page into donating money to the Macedonians overseas, under the pretense that it was to support veterans and their work promoting a presidential candidate.

"We are making this report open to the public so that Americans, our government, and groups targeted by foreign trolls can better understand this problem," said Rowan. "We are calling on the federal government to take swift, coordinated actions to impede criminal activity by foreign trolls."

"Because our military service makes veterans a target for foreign adversaries," said Rowan, "VVA is calling for the federal government to provide all servicemembers and veterans complementary cybersecurity software and training on cyber-hygiene." With over 22-million veterans in the country, the VA must play a central role in these efforts to protect veterans in online environments. "VVA is also calling on Congress to remove the current 2026 expiration of the identity-theft insurance and credit-monitoring services provided to victims of the 2015 data breach of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and to extend those programs indefinitely for all affected individuals, and all servicemembers and veterans," said Rowan. "The data that was stolen in the OPM breach by a hacking group suspected of being sponsored by the Chinese government is now and always will present a risk to the Americans impacted, so the resulting assistance programs should be without limitation."