

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 12, 2019

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We write to determine what actions the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is taking to educate veterans about online disinformation campaigns and other malign influence operations by Russian, Chinese, and other foreign entities and individuals. While countering disinformation targeting veterans is not a core VA function, identifying these tactics helps improve veterans' cyber security and their ability to detect and avoid falling prey to scams and other forms of manipulation. Accordingly, we seek information on whether the Department is using available resources effectively and appropriately to protect veterans from foreign malign influence operations that could undermine our democracy.

A recent investigative report by the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) determined that “known Russian propaganda and similar politically divisive content that targets servicemembers and veterans is being spread by admin[istrators] from at least 30 foreign countries,” and that “[t]hese foreign admin[istrators] have created individual social media accounts that purport to belong to American veterans working at reputable veterans organizations.”¹ The VVA investigation revealed that fake veteran accounts on social media platforms, including Facebook, attempt to recruit American veterans to follow, join, or moderate the content of fake pages.² The investigation also uncovered the role of foreign administrators on Snapchat, Instagram, and other applications in attempts to exploit veterans service organizations' logos and names to “spread false, politically divisive, and hateful content” and steal veterans' identities.³

Importantly, the VVA report “discovered foreign entities targeting veterans for the purpose of interference in the 2020 presidential campaign.”⁴ These attempts include foreign

¹ Vietnam Veterans of America, “An Investigation Into Foreign Entities Who Are Targeting Servicemembers and Veterans Online,” Kristofer Goldsmith, September 17, 2019, <https://vva.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/VVA-Investigation.pdf>; The New Republic, “Russian Trolls Love Targeting U.S. Veterans,” Jasper Craven, September 18, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/155105/russian-trolls-love-targeting-us-veterans>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ Vietnam Veterans of America, “An Investigation Into Foreign Entities Who Are Targeting Servicemembers and Veterans Online,” Kristofer Goldsmith, September 17, 2019, <https://vva.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/VVA-Investigation.pdf>

administrators who have created a fake “Vets for Trump” page that has amassed more than 131,000 followers, in some cases posting “pro-Russia/pro-Putin, pro-Assange/WikiLeaks, as well as anti-Robert-Mueller and anti-FBI content,” attacking prominent Congressional Democrats, and using xenophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric. The core objective of these tactics, the report observes, is to “sow discord among Americans, providing fuel for conflict on a public forum between veterans sympathetic to the damaging, false message planted and Americans of other political persuasions.”⁵

While VA appears to have made cybersecurity of its information systems and infrastructure – including veterans’ personal information – a priority,⁶ the Department does not appear to have an established strategy for educating veterans on the risks of social media-based disinformation and other malign influence campaigns by foreign adversaries and other malicious actors. The VVA report calls on the VA Secretary to “immediately develop plans to make the cyber-hygiene of veterans an urgent priority within the [VA],” and recommends that VA address online disinformation campaigns targeting veterans, including that the Department “must educate and train veterans on personal cybersecurity: how to mitigate vulnerabilities, vigilantly maintain safe practices, and recognize threats, including how to identify instances of online manipulation.”⁷

In addition to the VVA investigation, a recent bipartisan report by the Senate Intelligence Committee on Russia’s use of social media to interfere in the 2016 U.S. election observed that “[a]ddressing the challenge of disinformation in the long-term will ultimately need to be tackled by an informed and discerning population of citizens who are both alert to the threat and armed with the critical thinking skills necessary to protect against malicious interference.”⁸ That report recommended, in part, “the Executive Branch should, in the run up to the 2020 election, reinforce with the public the danger of attempted foreign interference in the 2020 election.”⁹ Therefore, we are interested in understanding whether VA is a participant in current or forthcoming Executive Branch efforts to build veterans’ resilience against foreign malign influence operations that seek to shake public faith in American democracy.

Given that malicious foreign actors are targeting veterans using disinformation through social media platforms and other online tools in relation to next year’s federal election and that countering foreign interference in American elections is critical to protecting the integrity of our democracy, we request that VA address the following questions by December 6, 2019:

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Enterprise Cybersecurity Strategy Protects Those Who Protected Us,” <https://www.oit.va.gov/reports/year-in-review/2018/eliminate-material-weaknesses/ecs>.

⁷ Vietnam Veterans of America, “An Investigation Into Foreign Entities Who Are Targeting Servicemembers and Veterans Online,” Kristofer Goldsmith, September 17, 2019, <https://vva.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/VVA-Investigation.pdf>.


⁸ Senate Committee on Intelligence, “Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 Election, Volume 2: Russia’s Use of Social Media with Additional Views,” October 8, 2019, https://www.warner.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/0/d/0dc0e6fe-4d52-49b0-9e92-a15224a74a29/C2ABC2CD38BA3C5207D7FA5352D53EC2.report-volume2.pdf.

⁹ *Id.*

1. What specific actions has VA taken to implement the VVA recommendations that the Department “immediately develop plans to make the cyber-hygiene of veterans an urgent priority within the [VA],” and that VA address online disinformation campaigns targeting veterans, including that the Department “must educate and train veterans on personal cybersecurity: how to mitigate vulnerabilities, vigilantly maintain safe practices, and recognize threats, including how to identify instances of online manipulation”?
2. How does VA educate veterans about online disinformation and other malign influence campaigns by foreign governments, entities, or individuals? Is there a designated official at VA who is tasked with helping veterans understand these malicious activities?
3. How does VA work with the Department of Defense (DoD) and other federal agencies to educate veterans about online disinformation and other malign influence campaigns by foreign governments, entities, or individuals?
4. How does VA work with social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, to educate veterans about disinformation campaigns on these platforms?
5. Are VA personnel, about one-third of whom are veterans,¹⁰ offered or provided any training regarding attempts by foreign adversaries or their proxies and agents to influence or recruit veterans as part of their disinformation campaigns?

Thank you for your attention to this matter.


Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator

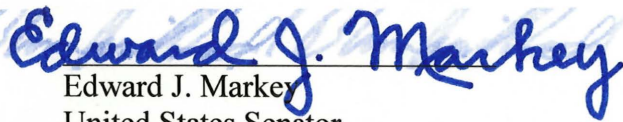


Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

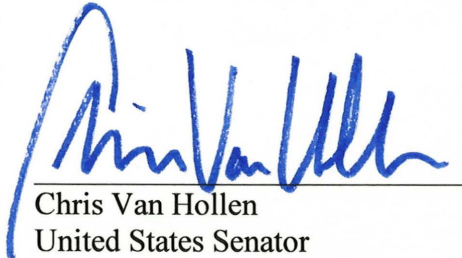
¹⁰ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Employment of Veterans in the Federal Executive Branch – Fiscal Year 2017,” February 2019, <https://www.fedshirevets.gov/veterans-council/veteran-employment-data/employment-of-veterans-in-the-federal-executive-branch-fy2017.pdf>.



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator




Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



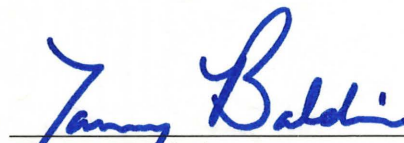
Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Tom Udall
United States Senator



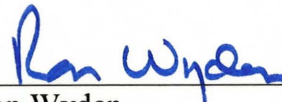
Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



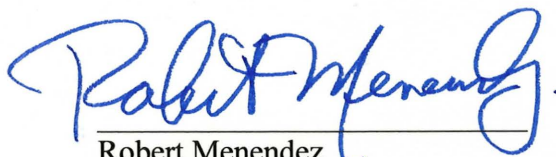
Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Doug Jones
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

Kirsten Gillibrand

Kirsten Gillibrand
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Jack Reed

Jack Reed
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Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

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Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator