

Testimony
Of
Vietnam Veterans of America



Presented by

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Before the

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Regarding

Hijacking our Heroes: Exploiting Veterans through
Disinformation on Social Media

November 13, 2019

Good afternoon, Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Dr. Roe, and distinguished members of this committee. We at Vietnam Veterans of America, and I personally, are deeply grateful for your decision to hold this hearing, and for your commitment to ensuring that America addresses foreign-born cyber threats against service members, veterans, our families and survivors.

My name is Kristofer Goldsmith, and I am Chief Investigator and Associate Director for Policy and Government Affairs at VVA. I served with the Army's Third Infantry Division as a Forward Observer, and deployed for a year to Sadr City, Baghdad, in 2005.

Many of you know me for my work on the issue of helping veterans with bad-paper discharges, and for being the young guy representing VVA as we joined with our VSO partners to create and advocate for the passage of the Forever GI Bill. In an ideal world, these things would still be my primary focus here at VVA.

VVA gave me the title of Chief Investigator out of necessity. I took on this additional role when VVA came to realize that we were facing a series of foreign-born online imposters who were creating social media accounts and websites that were meant to trick our members and supporters. These imposters were, and still are, using the name and brand of our congressionally chartered VSO to spread actual fake news that is meant to inflame national divisions.

Since beginning our investigation, we've found and exposed election interference related to the 2020 presidential race by these foreign entities. VVA has documented what we believe to be campaign finance fraud, with well-known Macedonian crooks tricking followers of the Vets for Trump PAC's Facebook page into sending political donations overseas via PayPal. These Macedonians had staged a hostile takeover of two pages originally owned by real American veterans, and then used them to build up xenophobic hatred against four women of color in Congress and then tie

them to Democratic 2020 presidential candidates. They also used these pages to spread disinformation about elections in New York, my home state.

Separately, we discovered a host of foreign entities from Eastern Europe and the Asian Pacific selling counterfeit merchandise featuring VVA's trademarked logo alongside racist, political propaganda.

We've found multiple entities from Russia, Ukraine, and Bulgaria, who are purporting to be VVA on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google, and Reddit. We've been tracking a bot network on Twitter which finds and follows veteran advocates like myself and my colleagues behind me, and tries to blend in with the veterans' community by retweeting official government accounts, veterans' organizations, and political organizations like the NRA. People who then follow these accounts get automated messages in broken English with suspicious links.

We've discovered that Nigeria hosts a massive organized criminal empire, which uses the names and photos of troops and veterans to lure Americans into romance scams. Because some of these names and photos are of troops killed in action, their Gold Star families are retraumatized as their deceased loved ones continue to be used as bait for financial fraud. Some of the victims whose names get used are your own colleagues, veterans who serve in Congress. In one example, Congressman Lee Zeldin, a fellow Long Islander, had photos of him and his kids exploited to make it look like he was a widower in search of new love.

We've done a close analysis of the infamous "Russian Ads" that were released by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Among them were at least 113 ads directed at veterans, or which used veterans as props in Russia's mission to divide Americans. Facebook's micro-targeting allowed these Russian entities to specifically target the followers of AMVETS, DAV, IAVA, PVA, VVA, WWP, and a host of veterans' organizations which operate on the political spectrum, like CVA and VVAW. At least two of these ads on Instagram featured a friend of mine, an

advocate for veterans and service dogs. Those of you who have been on this committee for a while knew Captain Luis Carlos Montalvan and his canine, Tuesday. Our friend died by suicide in December 2016, but he lives on as evidence of Russia's insidious campaign against us.

If the committee would indulge me for a moment — Would those who are in this room who remember reports from 2015 of the so-called Cyber-Caliphate, an affiliate of ISIS, sending threatening messages to military families — please raise your hand?

Thank you. Now, who among you, in this time of rapid-fire breaking news that has overwhelmed us all, has had the opportunity to read the follow-up stories which revealed that these terroristic threats were actually made by Russian hackers who were pretending to be ISIS?

It's important to note that the military families were not chosen at random. One was a reporter at Military.com; the others were prominent members of the community of military and veteran advocates. I want to emphasize this point — Russian hackers who were pretending to be ISIS sent terroristic threats to advocates and reporters who appear before, or report about, this committee. And in the flurry of news, it seems like hardly anyone knows that this even happened.

We've detailed our findings in a 191-page report that's publicly available on our website, <https://vva.org/trollreport/> which we at VVA encourage all of you to read.

How VVA Discovered the First Imposter Organization

On or about August 17, 2017, in helping VVA's Communications Director manage our social media accounts, I found a Facebook page that was using the name "Vietnam Vets of America." The person or people behind it eventually built an online following twice the size of our own, eventually

reaching nearly a quarter of a million followers, using VVA's trademarked logo as their page's first profile photo.

At first, when I saw that the website address was "vvets.eu," I thought that this was a member or VVA chapter somewhere in Europe. With a membership of 86,000 strong and growing, we've got members all over the world who use social media to keep in touch with their sisters and brothers in arms, and they build their own websites to organize for their chapters. I figured that since they were doing such a great job with the page — posting engaging content, high-quality videos, and news relevant to veterans — that perhaps we should reach out and offer them a job.

After following the page with my personal Facebook account, I noticed a story that they posted on their website about the President proposing a budget which would cut certain veterans' benefits in order to expand access to private care. This link was paired with a post on the Facebook page bearing VVA's name and logo calling for action and for followers to express their outrage, and to share the story with their friends. The story went viral, reaching thousands and thousands of veterans.

This article was a true story. Stars and Stripes reporter Nikki Wentling, whom many of you on the committee know personally, wrote it when President Trump had introduced his first budget in May 2017. But it was now September 2017. The admins behind the Facebook page and website had plagiarized the article word-for-word on their website, and just changed the date to make it look immediate and urgent — so that they could gin up anger against the new President and send our members, aging Vietnam Veterans, many with serious health issues, into a panic.

As someone who works on veterans' policy for a living, I was able to quickly recognize this as what we call falsified news — that the page had taken an old story and made it look new for nefarious purposes. But most veterans don't follow politics and policy the way that I do, and they had good reason to be upset when they saw what looked like a trusted source —

what looked like VVA — sharing an urgent update about a proposed cut to benefits.

Once VVA realized that the page did not have the best interests of our members in mind, VVA's Communications team filed complaints through Facebook's standard reporting tools, and reported every use of our trademarked logo. The admins of the page responded to our reporting them by quickly removing all instances of our logo from their page so that they were no longer in violation of Facebook's terms. Facebook told us after we filed additional complaints that the use of the name "Vietnam Vets of America" and their imitation of our organization was not a violation of their terms of service, and that it was up to us to educate our membership on what our real page looks like.

The idea that VVA should on our own train 86,000 seniors living all over the world how to differentiate real and imposter Facebook pages is preposterous. Because Facebook's regular reporting and complaint functions were a dead end, we appealed to the media to raise awareness for the issue of the imposter page. By a stroke of luck, one of those stories came out immediately before representatives of Facebook were scheduled to testify before several congressional committees. Members from both chambers addressed these Facebook officials directly about the imposter VVA page. They replied that they knew nothing of it, yet the page was taken down within 24 hours.

Later VVA established contact with Facebook's Threat Intelligence Team, and they were much more helpful to us in taking down any abusive content that we flagged for them. But the information-sharing only went in one direction — we would find what looked to us to be foreign-born scammers and/or influence campaigns, and Facebook would take action — but Facebook representatives were telling us that their user-privacy agreement prohibited them from letting us know anything about what we found.

In reporting abusive content this way, without information being shared by both parties, VVA was essentially acting as an unpaid consultant for Facebook.

How the Investigation Got Started

In February 2018 we discovered another imposter VVA page, which was using the name “Vietnam-Veterans.org,” and sharing links to the same content that we had seen months earlier on a new website. It was clear that this was the same actor, but they had developed a new logo, adjusting their “brand” to look more legitimate. We then discovered that the same entity had created accounts with the same branding on Twitter and Instagram. So, we started digging deeper. Then we found a Facebook page called “Nam Vets,” which was also being operated by the same entity. Except this page wasn’t a new one — it had been created in 2015, using VVA’s logo as its profile photo. The page had been dormant, apparently since the original “Vietnam Vets of America” page was more successful in building a massive following.

At this time, Facebook did not yet display the country of origin of the admins of Facebook pages, but we could tell that this was likely a persistent foreign entity because of grammatical errors in posts that are typical of non-native English speakers.

When we discovered that the troll had forgotten to anonymously register the new “Vietnam-Veterans.org” website, we were able to trace this entity back to Plodiv, Bulgaria, and a person using the name or pseudonym “Nikola Mitov,” and the email address “forthevets1000@gmail.com.” Mitov had — and in some cases still has — a presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google, and Reddit. All accounts were primarily focused on deceiving and exploiting American veterans.

On these websites, the Bulgarian imposter would frequently plagiarize real stories from reporters, including those of the reporters in this room during

this hearing, about legislative proposals that would negatively affect some of VVA's members. They would change the dates on particularly inflammatory stories to make it appear as if you — the members of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs — were constantly trying to cut essential veterans benefits.

Rather than hand this information over to Facebook, which would have likely resulted in the immediate closure of the offending accounts, we began documenting the activity of the pages and studying them. We prepared a brief on our findings for Congress and the federal agencies that we believed should be concerned with the issue of imposter VSO accounts being created by foreign entities. In March and April 2018 VVA sent this brief as letters to the Departments of Justice, Veterans Affairs, Homeland Security, and Defense, as well as to the FBI. We've called on the DoD and VA to coordinate in efforts to inoculate troops and veterans against these hostile cyber campaigns.

To date, we have not received a response from any office from the Executive branch.

Several members of Congress cited our brief during hearings which featured Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and other high-ranking representatives of the company as witnesses. Again, Facebook's representatives claimed ignorance of the issue of imposter VSO pages, and the new pages were quickly brought down after lawmakers confronted Facebook.

Why Service Members, Veterans, and Our Families Are Targeted

From the perspective of our adversaries, our community is an economically efficient target for influence campaigns. Veterans are more likely than any other demographic in the US to vote, run for office, and motivate others to vote. Our opinions and political beliefs are generally highly respected across the entire political spectrum, and as a result, our behavior often influences

the behavior of those around us. In many cases, as a veteran votes, so does her family and circle of friends.

In instances of financial fraud or romance scams, foreign criminals are exploiting the general sense of trust that the American people have in those who serve in uniform. People put their guard down when they are interacting with someone who is serving the country, and that includes when they're interacting online. There is a large organized crime ring based in Nigeria that recognizes this, and has built an industry around stealing veterans' identities for use in financial scams. These men in Nigeria proudly call themselves "Yahoo Boys," a nickname that came about in the 1990's from e-mail scams from supposed "Nigerian Princes" who offered huge deposits in exchange for private banking information.

These criminals frequently steal veterans' deployment photos and use them to create online social media profiles. They then use those imposter profiles to enter online groups which are made for grieving Gold Star families. These predators know that with a military death comes a large life insurance payout, so they use these stolen identities to comfort widows and widowers, offering love and attention to people who need it most. After weeks or months of grooming a victim, forming what the victim believes to be a romantic relationship, the scammers will make up stories about being in desperate financial situations. With their minds clouded by loneliness and grief, victims will often send large sums of money believing that they're helping a service member in need fly across the world so that they can finally meet. Then the scammers doctor photos of plane tickets and send them to victims. Victims often end up waiting at an airport for hours before they come to realize that the love that they had felt for someone was a lie.

News reports have documented several cases in which victims of these scams die by suicide after realizing that they were tricked into giving away their life-savings.

Foreign Entities Using Veterans as Props in the 2020 Election

Our full report documents several ways that American veterans and service members are used by foreign entities to influence the political beliefs and behavior of the American public. This summer, VVA discovered that the Facebook page “Vets for Trump,” a digital property of the “Vets for Trump PAC, LLC,” was run entirely by foreign entities.

Infamous Macedonian trolls, the Arsov brothers, who had previously been outed for publishing fake news supportive of Donald Trump’s candidacy by American press and Macedonian anti-corruption groups in the wake of the 2016 elections — were the ones who had control of the “Vets for Trump” Facebook page until mid-August 2019. The Macedonians took control of the page when it had around 110,000 Facebook followers, and while publishing vile racist, xenophobic, and islamophobic content, increased their following to around 131,000 followers. In this time they posted disinformation regarding voter eligibility, attacked Democratic presidential candidates, and promoted the candidacy of President Donald Trump. The Macedonians frequently targeted freshmen Congresswomen Ocasio-Cortez, Omar, Tlaib, and Pressley, ginning up ethic-based hatred and fear — and then tying them to Democratic presidential candidates.

The Macedonians also engaged in what VVA believes is campaign fraud, soliciting political donations from victims who sent messages to the page offering to support the “Vets for Trump” PAC.

These Macedonians claimed to VVA and to the *Washington Post* that this was “just business,” and a money-making venture, but there is little evidence to support this claim. They were not selling merchandise or posting links to ad-filled websites. They were not openly soliciting donations. They kept original the “Vets for Trump PAC’s” website embedded within the Facebook page. Their true motivations of the Macedonians who stole the “Vets for Trump” page and then used it to interfere with American domestic

politics remains unclear, and looks to have cost more to run than they could have made via the occasional illegal “donation.”

Although followers of the “Vets for Trump” page could, in theory, click on the “page transparency” link to see that the page was exclusively under the control of people outside the United States — few, if any, did. These foreigners didn’t only fool lay-people whose lives aren’t focused on politics, policy, and campaigns. Followers of the “Vets for Trump” page who didn’t seem to notice that it was controlled by foreign entities included a member of the New Hampshire House of Representatives and former Trump campaign surrogate, as well as the inaugural chairman of GOP Vets.

This is just one example of the politically-manipulative foreign-born entities that we found during our investigation. VVA has identified over 100 Facebook politically-focused pages which produce content targeting veterans which we have either confirmed of having, or we suspect of having foreign admins. Another, “Vietnam Veterans Advocacy Group,” had more than 100,000 followers and posted explicitly pro-Obama and anti-Trump content. We’ve found scores of additional social media accounts across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram which have essentially kept the divisive “Russian ads” alive by reposting them as organic content. On Facebook pages with fewer than 100,000 followers, admin locations aren’t automatically revealed. Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and other social media platforms don’t require admin locations to be revealed at all.

Conclusion

This committee must help service members, veterans, and our families resist the influence of foreign disinformation campaigns and efforts to divide us along partisan lines. In order to accomplish this, the committee must help us to rally a whole-of-government response to address these issues.

The committee must require the VA to take efforts to shield veterans from financial fraud, spear-phishing, and other cyber threats. Cyber Hygiene must

be considered a critical aspect of veterans' overall health needs in the 21st Century, and the committee should encourage the White House to create the position of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Cyber-Health, a political appointee who this committee can hold accountable for modernizing the VA's approach to ensuring that veterans' healthcare enters the digital age.

In recognition of the fact that our service makes us targets of foreign adversaries long after we remove our uniforms, this committee should empower the VA to offer a lifetime of access to complementary cyber-security software to veterans, and expand identity-theft insurance and credit monitoring to all who have served.

Social media companies must be held accountable for imposing a cost on VVA, other veterans' organizations, and individual veterans, who through their ineffective policies are forcing us to constantly monitor their platforms for criminals seeking to victimize Americans by exploiting our trusted brands and personal identities.

The committee should commission a study on the physical and mental-health effects of cybercrimes and propaganda campaigns that are directed at veterans. The Committee should pass legislation to aid veterans who have fallen victim to cybercrime.

On behalf of Vietnam Veterans of America, we thank you for your attention to this very serious issue.

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA

Funding Statement

November 13, 2019

The national organization Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a non-profit veterans' membership organization registered as a 501(c) (19) with the Internal Revenue Service. VVA is also appropriately registered with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives in compliance with the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995.

VVA is not currently in receipt of any federal grant or contract, other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for outreach and direct services through its Veterans Benefits Program (Service Representatives). This is also true of the previous two fiscal years.

For Further Information, Contact:

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Kristofer Goldsmith

Kristofer Goldsmith joined the policy and government-affairs team at Vietnam Veterans of America in May 2016. In his role, he advises members of Congress and the administration on the implementation of policy regarding post-9/11 American veterans.

Mr. Goldsmith was born in New York and joined the Army to serve as a forward observer with the Army's Third Infantry Division shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He deployed with Alpha Company of the Third Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom for the year of 2005. Since separating from the Army with a General Discharge after surviving a PTSD-related suicide attempt, Mr. Goldsmith has become an advocate for veterans with PTSD and those with less-than-honorable discharges. Twelve years after his separation from the military, the Army corrected his discharge characterization to Honorable.

As a disabled student veteran using the VA's Vocational Rehabilitation program, Mr. Goldsmith found an opportunity both to recover from PTSD and to continue serving his fellow veterans. At Nassau Community College (NCC), he established a million-dollar veteran-resource facility, which serves as a center for hundreds of student veterans. After two years as president of NCC's Student Veterans of America chapter, he transferred to Columbia University's School of General Studies to pursue a bachelor's degree in political science.

Mr. Goldsmith is the founder and president of High Ground Veterans Advocacy, a 501c3 not-for-profit, which partners with military and Veterans Service Organizations to train veterans to become grassroots advocates and leaders in their local communities. High Ground Veterans Advocacy was recognized in 2016 by HillVets as one of the nation's top new veteran's organizations.

Since 2017, Mr. Goldsmith has been investigating foreign entities that target troops, veterans, and their families online. He believes it is the responsibility of today's young veterans to keep the motto of VVA alive: "Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another."