



Vietnam Veterans of America

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April 5, 2018

Chairman Greg Walden
c/o: Nolan Ahern, Military/Veterans
Legislative Assistant
Personal Office Staff
U.S. House Committee on Energy and
Commerce
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.
c/o: James Johnson, Military/Veterans
Legislative Assistant
Personal Office Staff
U.S. House Committee on Energy and
Commerce
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Foreign Entities Imitating American Veterans Organizations and Sowing Discord with Falsified or Manipulated News

Dear Chairman Walden and Ranking Member Pallone,

We are writing to bring the attention of the Committee to an issue of national security. Here we are presenting evidence of a foreign entity (or entities) operating on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram with the intent to infiltrate and influence the community of American Veterans online. Similar to widely-reported stories of “troll farms” sowing discord during the 2016 election cycle and specifically targeting veterans,¹ these online entities operate by first appealing to patriotic Americans, and once they have gained the trust of tens or hundreds of thousands of followers, they begin spreading manipulated and divisive news and other political content.

Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a congressionally chartered Veteran Service Organization whose membership exceeds 80,000 Vietnam Veterans living around the globe. For many of our aging and disabled veterans, their most significant connection to VVA and the outside world is through use of the internet and social media platforms. According to a recent Oxford study, veterans are trusted by the civilian populace as opinion leaders, which makes us a

¹ Schreckinger, Ben, et al. “How Russia Targets the U.S. Military.” *POLITICO Magazine*, POLITICO LLC, 12 June 2017, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/12/how-russia-targets-the-us-military-215247.

natural target for influence.² It is for the protection of our veterans, and the sanctity of the American electorate that we urge you to investigate this issue and take appropriate proactive measures to ensure a safe and trustworthy cyber environment for American veterans.

On August 21, 2017, we discovered a Facebook page titled “*Vietnam Vets of America*,”³ which had at times been using our logo and registered trademark to deceive its online audience into thinking it was an affiliate of our legitimate veterans service organization.⁴ Posts from “*Vietnam Vets of America*” typically linked to “*vvets.eu*,” a website anonymously registered⁵ through Netfinity JSC⁶ of Bulgaria. After filing complaints for copyright infringements via Facebook’s Help tools, we monitored the page for activity, and reached out directly to report the suspicious page to a member of Facebook’s Security Team on August 23, 2017.⁷

While most of the posts shared on “*Vietnam Vets of America*” were junk memes of no significance, the page did occasionally share deceptive or manipulated news and political content that was likely shared to incite an emotional reaction from veterans. On September 26, 2017, the page shared a manipulated video using “Facebook Live,” which streamed a looped 58-second long clip about a Vietnam Veterans monument being defaced for approximately four hours.⁸ We immediately reported this to Facebook’s Security Team, and logged a complaint for “spam” via Facebook’s video reporting function. The original video had been produced by News 22 WWLP, a local news station from Springfield Massachusetts,⁹ however, a caption was inserted by “*Vietnam Vets of America*” over the video that said “DO YOU THINK THE CRIMINALS MUST SUFFER?” with icons encouraging people to respond with the “heart” and “angry-face” reactions. Over the course of the four-hour video — thousands of shares, comments and reactions were produced — taking advantage of Facebook’s algorithms which promote popular

² John D. Gallacher, Vlad Barash, Philip N. Howard, and John Kelly. “Junk News on Military Affairs and National Security: Social Media Disinformation Campaigns Against US Military Personnel and Veterans.” *Data Memo* 2017.9. Oxford, UK: *Project on Computational Propaganda*. Comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk.
<http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/working-papers/vetops/>

³ Web address: <https://www.facebook.com/americanvvets/>. This page has since been taken down by Facebook, but is likely recoverable by Facebook, Inc for the purposes of research and investigation. See *Addendum 1* for screenshot of “*Vietnam Vets of America*” Facebook homepage.

⁴ Evidence of the use of our logo was deleted by the “*Vietnam Vets of America*” Facebook Page after our communications staff filed a complaint to the anonymous page administrator. Below is evidence of the same entity using our trademark on a different Facebook page.

⁵ DomainTools. “Whois Record for VVets.eu.” *Domain Tools WhoIs Records*, 20 Mar. 2018, www.whois.domaintools.com/vvets.eu.

⁶ “NETFINITI” EAD. “Netfinity Home Page.” *Netfinity.bg*, 20 Mar. 2018, www.netfinity.bg/.

⁷ Email traffic with a representative of Facebook’s security team will be presented to investigators upon request.

⁸ This video has since been taken down by Facebook, but is likely recoverable by Facebook, Inc for the purposes of research and investigations. See *Addendum 2* for screenshot. Web address:

<https://www.facebook.com/americanvvets/videos/1722930374682550/>

⁹ See *Addendum 3* for screenshot. Caron, Matt. “Black Vietnam Veterans Monument in Springfield Vandalized.” *WWLP.com*, Nexstar Broadcasting, Inc., 26 Sept. 2017, www.wwlp.com/2017/09/25/black-vietnam-veterans-monument-in-springfield-vandalized/.

“live” videos, increasing the likelihood that people who didn’t yet “like” or follow the page would be exposed to it. This video contained a link to the *vvets.eu* website, which copied the written content of News 22 WWLP’s reporting.¹⁰ By October 3, 2017, the manipulated video had been viewed over 37,000 times.

Other divisive, political content that was shared by “*Vietnam Vets of America*” included the NFL “Take a Knee” and boycott controversies¹¹ and “Blue Lives Matter.”¹² While these types of memes were popular among Americans on social media, their use by a foreign entity is consistent with information warfare tactics described in the Russian book *Information-Psychological War Operations: A Short Encyclopedia and Reference Guide*.¹³

The rate at which the “*Vietnam Vets of America*” page grew in followers is staggering. According to their “About” page, they went from 30,000 followers on November 1, 2016, to 196,567 as of October 2017.¹⁴

On October 9, 2017, after having not found a solution through talks with Facebook’s Security Team, VVA began to go public via the press with appeals to the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to take proactive measures to protect servicemembers and veterans online from foreign political influence.¹⁵ On October 18, 2017, Facebook responded to questioning by *Stars and Stripes* regarding our specific complaints by saying that the “*Vietnam Vets of America*” page had not violated Facebook terms of use,¹⁶ and placed the burden on VVA to speak out and educate Facebook users of the imposter page.

¹⁰ Anonymous "Administrator," *vvets.eu/author/nmitow*. “Vietnam Veterans Monument in Springfield Vandalized.” *Vietnam Vets of America*, 26 Sept. 2017, *vvets.eu/vietnam-veterans-monument-springfield-vandalized/*.

¹¹ “NFL Boycott” post has since been removed, although Facebook may have the ability to restore it. <https://www.facebook.com/americanvvets/posts/1723531927955728>

¹² “Blue Lives Matter” post has since been removed, although Facebook may have the ability to restore it. <https://www.facebook.com/americanvvets/posts/1721512648157656>

¹³ From *The Guardian*: “The book is designed for “students, political technologists, state security services and civil servants” – a kind of user’s manual for junior information warriors. The deployment of information weapons, it suggests, “acts like an invisible radiation” upon its targets: “The population doesn’t even feel it is being acted upon. So the state doesn’t switch on its self-defence mechanisms.” If regular war is about actual guns and missiles, the encyclopedia continues, “information war is subtle, you can never predict the angle or instruments of an attack.” Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/apr/09/kremlin-hall-of-mirrors-military-information-psychology>

¹⁴ This page has since been removed by Facebook. Several other milestones of audience growth were posted there. https://www.facebook.com/pg/americanvvets/about/?ref=page_internal

¹⁵ Shane, Leo. “Report: Online Trolls Targeting US Troops, Veterans.” *Military Times*, Military Times, 10 Oct. 2017, www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2017/10/10/report-online-trolls-targeting-us-troops-veterans/.

¹⁶ Wentling, Nikki. “Veterans Organization Asks for More Help Combating 'Imposter' Facebook Page.” *Stars and Stripes*, Stars and Stripes, 18 Oct. 2017, www.stripes.com/news/veterans-organization-asks-for-more-help-combating-imposter-facebook-page-1.493168.

On October 24, 2017, Facebook removed the suspect page for violation of copyright, though no information was publicly shared regarding who had been operating the page.¹⁷ At a November 1, 2017 hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee on Russian interference in America's election on social media, Facebook's lawyer, Colin Stretch, denied knowledge of the imposter VVA page or efforts to target veterans when questioned directly on the matter by Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia.¹⁸ Mr Stretch did not promise specific efforts by Facebook to counteract such deception aimed at veterans.

As of the writing of this report, DoD and VA have yet to respond to VVA's request that they coordinate federal efforts to protect servicemembers and veterans from deceptive, foreign-generated online content.

On February 21, 2018, we became aware of two new Facebook pages, "Nam Vets" and "Vietnam-Veterans.org," which link to "vvets.eu" as well as a sister site, *Vietnam-Veterans.org*, which uses a similar logo¹⁹ and posts identical content.²⁰ According to the About section of the "Nam Vets" Facebook page, they had reached 500 followers on November 24, 2017, and they now have 3,044 followers.²¹ The Facebook page "Vietnam-Veterans.org" first posted on December 10, 2017,²² and they now have 155 followers. Although these pages have relatively few followers, they have an engaged audience, who often respond to posts asking for them to divulge information, such as what unit they served with and when they were deployed.

We have opted not to file complaints with Facebook at this time, as their simply shutting down pages does not prevent others from rising in their place, nor does it allow us to find out who is behind them or what their motivations are.

Like the now defunct "Vietnam Vets of America" page, the "Nam Vets" Facebook page began by using VVA's logo to gain trust from American veterans.²³ According to the timestamp on the

¹⁷ Wentling, Nikki. "Facebook Shuts down 'Imposter' Veterans Page." *Stars and Stripes*, Stars and Stripes, 25 Oct. 2017, www.stripes.com/facebook-shuts-down-imposter-veterans-page-1.494404.

¹⁸ "Hearing: Social Media Influence in the 2016 U.S. Elections." *Hearings | Intelligence Committee*, U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 1 Nov. 2017, www.intelligence.senate.gov/hearings/open-hearing-social-media-influence-2016-us-elections.

¹⁹ See Addendum 3 for comparison of "vvets.eu" and "Vietnam-Veterans.org" logos.

²⁰ "Home Page." *Veterans of America*, 20 Mar. 2018, vietnam-veterans.org/.

²¹ "Nam Vets" Facebook page is <https://www.facebook.com/Nam-Vets-241974999306216/> and "Vietnam-Veterans.org" Facebook page is <https://www.facebook.com/vietnamveterans.org/>.

²² "Facebook Post." *Vietnam-Veterans.org Updated Their Cover Photo*, Vietnam-Veterans.org Facebook Page, 10 Dec. 2017, www.facebook.com/vietnamveterans.org/posts/1741676985864149.

²³ See Addendum 4 for screenshot of "Nam Vets" using VVA's trademarked logo. "Facebook Post," *Nam Vets Updated Their Cover Photo*, Nam Vets Facebook Page, 17 Apr. 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/241974999306216/photos/a.241975099306206.1073741825.241974999306216/241975105972872/?type=1&theater>.

post with our logo, the “*Nam Vets*” Facebook page existed as early as April 17, 2015. Its first posts links to a now archived website containing inflammatory political content such as videos of protesters stomping on American flags.²⁴ Content more recently posted on the Facebook pages and affiliated websites includes pictures and videos of Veterans Memorials being defaced (with deceptive dating to make these events appear more recent),²⁵ a video produced by the Department of Veterans Affairs,²⁶ and the illegally copied text²⁷ of an article written by Nikki Wentling of *Stars and Stripes*²⁸ regarding cuts to veterans benefits (which was posted well after it was current news).²⁹

The new site “*Vietnam-Veterans.org*” is registered to one Nikola Mitov, also through Netfinity JSC of Bulgaria.³⁰ When searching the street address (“210 6-th september BLVD”) for the registrant provided on the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) website, the street address shows up in Ukraine,³¹ rather than Bulgaria as listed — although this may be due to translation errors or limitations of Google Maps. Both Bulgaria³² and Ukraine³³ have struggled to control online trolls who work to promote pro-Russian disinformation.

²⁴ “Archived page: [EXCLUSIVE]Veteran arrested for defending the American flag from stomping[EXCLUSIVE],” *Wayback Machine*, Internet Archive, 20 Mar. 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150630003749/http://skivai.eu:80/537>.

²⁵ Video comprised of still images of a defaced Vietnam Veterans Memorial. *Nam Vets*. “*Nam Vets Facebook Video.*” *Nam Vets - SHOCKING! The Memorial Wall in Venice, LA Is...*, Facebook, 2017, www.facebook.com/241974999306216/videos/474542656049448/.

²⁶ The video on the “*Nam Vets*” Facebook page was originally produced by Department of Veterans Affairs Explore.VA.gov website. Copied content: “*Nam Vets.*” *Nam Vets - Every Veteran Must Read This! Read More...*, Facebook, 2017, www.facebook.com/241974999306216/videos/10156145737652558/. Original web location of content: Department of Veterans Affairs. “*Explore VA Benefits Overview.*” *The Official YouTube Channel for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*, YouTube, 19 June 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOLGDmtN8sU&feature=youtu.be. <https://explore.va.gov/video-gallery>.

²⁷ Copied text. Anonymous “Administrator,” *vvets.eu/author/macman*. “*Cuts to VA Programs.*” *Vietnam Veterans of America*, 6 July 2017, vvets.eu/cuts-va-programs/.

²⁸ Original content from *Stars and Stripes* as posted on *Military.com*. Wentling, Nikki. “*Budget Calls for Cuts to VA Programs as Tradeoff for Extending Choice.*” *Military.com*, Stars and Stripes, 23 May 2017, www.military.com/daily-news/2017/05/23/budget-calls-cuts-va-programs-tradeoff-extending-choice.html.

²⁹ See Addendum 5 for December 27, 2017 posting of the copied *Stripes* article that was originally written on May 23, 2017.

³⁰ Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers. “*ICANN WHOIS Records for VIETNAM-VETERANS.ORG.*” *ICANN WHOIS*, Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, 20 Mar. 2018, www.whois.icann.org/en/lookup?name=vietnam-veterans.org.

³¹ Google. “*Google Maps.*” *Google Maps*, 20 Mar. 2018, www.goo.gl/maps/qABVB7PAY2Q2. Search query: “210 6-th september BLVD, Plovdiv Plovdiv 4000 BG”.

³² Colborne, Michael. “*Made in Bulgaria: Pro-Russian Propaganda.*” *Coda Story*, Coda Media, Inc., 9 May 2017, www.codastory.com/disinformation-crisis/foreign-proxies/made-in-bulgaria-pro-russian-propaganda.

³³ Collins, Ben, and Katie Zavadski. “*Zuckerberg Blew Off Russian Troll Warnings Before the Attack on America.*” *The Daily Beast*, The Daily Beast Company, 27 Sept. 2017, www.thedailybeast.com/zuckerberg-blew-off-warnings-of-russian-trolls-in-2015.

The “*Vietnam-Veterans.org*” entity is now spread across at least two new social media platforms, including Twitter³⁴ and Instagram.³⁵ We do not know if the “*Nam Vets*” or “*Vietnam Vets of America*” Facebook pages have or had affiliated accounts across other social media platforms, but suspect that this entity has been operating consistently.

On behalf of the 80,000+ members of Vietnam Veterans of America, we are requesting the assistance of your committee in investigating the use of social media by foreign actors to target and influence American Veterans. As social media becomes evermore important to the daily lives of all generations of veterans, we hope to see the government take a proactive approach to ensuring a safe cyber environment. Should you have questions on this matter, please feel free to contact Kristofer Goldsmith, Assistant Director for Policy and Government Affairs at kgoldsmith@vva.org or 516-457-1260.

Sincerely,



John Rowan
National President and CEO
Vietnam Veterans of America

Cc:

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. Senate Committee on Intelligence
U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence
U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services
U.S. House Committee on Armed Services
U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary

³⁴ Vietnam-veterans.org. “Vietnam-Veterans.org (@Vietnamvetsorg).” *Twitter*, Twitter, 13 Mar. 2018, www.twitter.com/vietnamvetsorg.

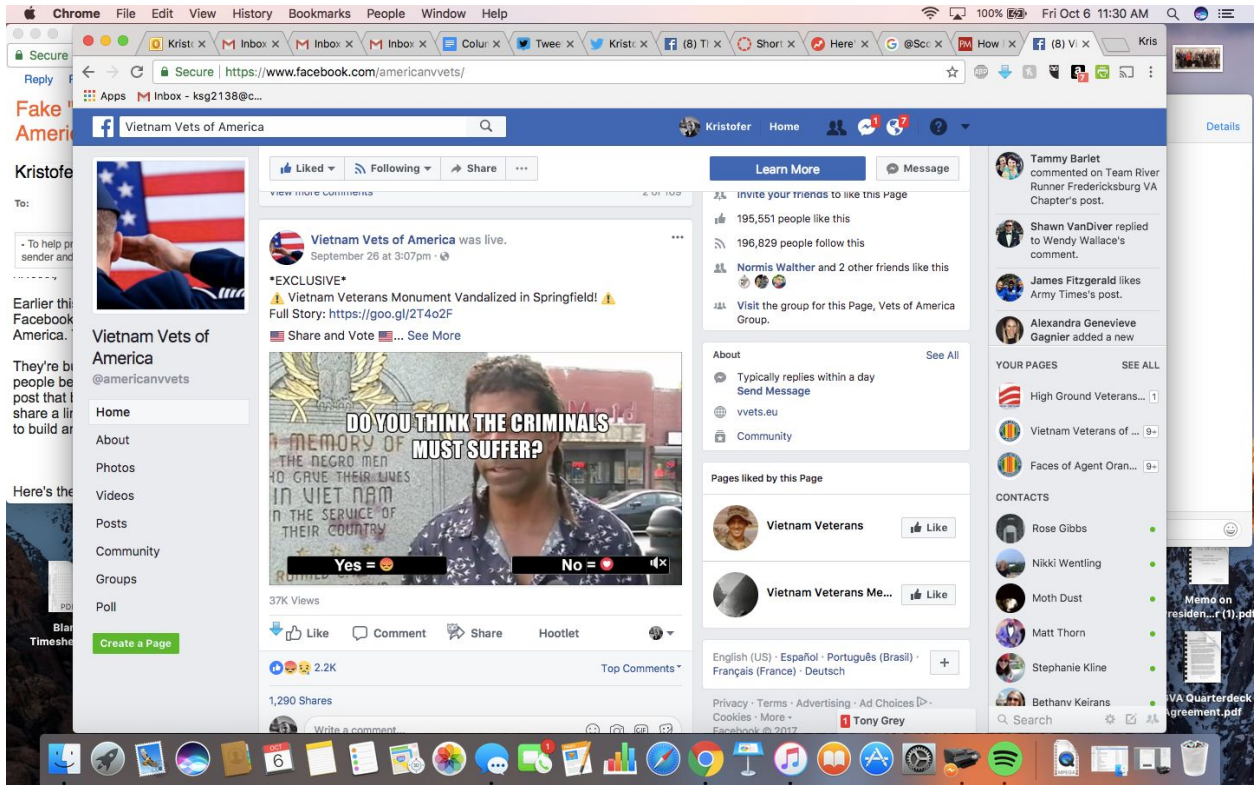
³⁵ “Veterans of America (@Vietnamveteransorg) • Instagram Photos and Videos.” *Instagram*, Instagram, 20 Mar. 2018, www.instagram.com/vietnamveteransorg/.

U.S. Department of Defense
U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation
U.S. Federal Trade Commission
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

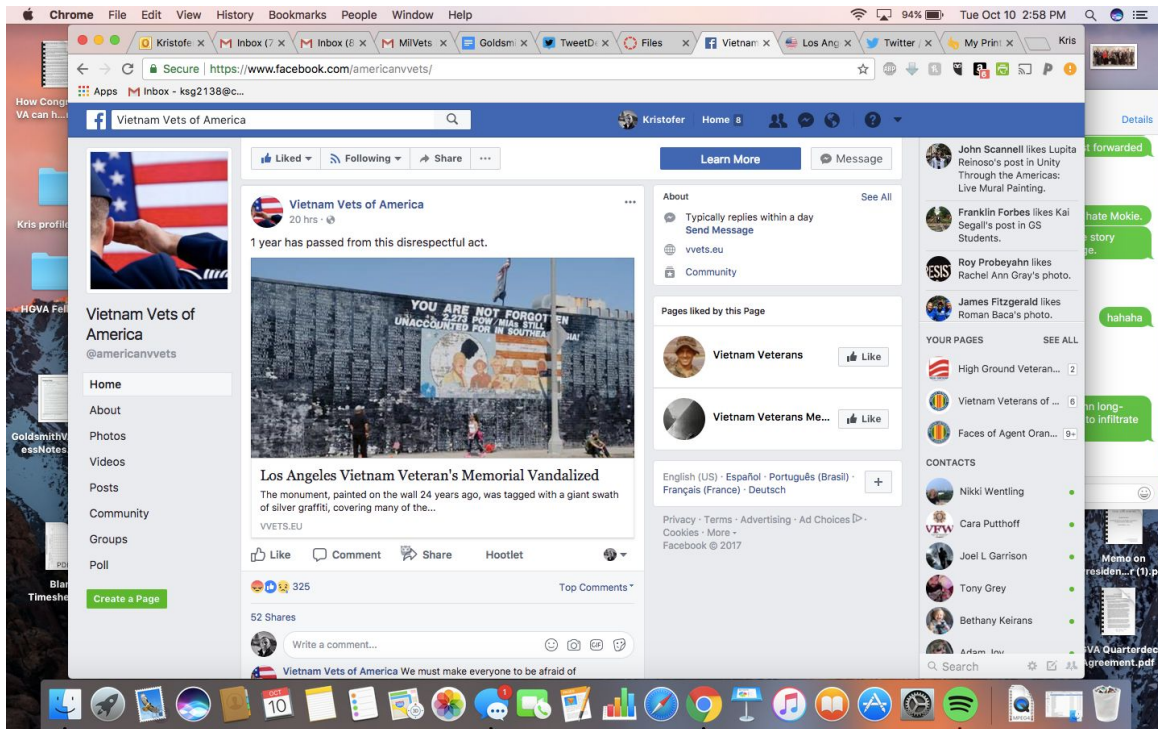
Addendum 1: Screenshot of “Vietnam Vets of America” Facebook Page.

The screenshot shows the Facebook page for "Vietnam Vets of America" (@americanvets). The page layout includes a navigation menu on the left with options like Home, About, Photos, Videos, Posts, Community, Groups, and Poll. The main content area features a cover photo with the text "OVER 100K STRONG VETS" and a post about a brother who was held hostage in Iran for 444 days. The post text reads: "This is my brother Sgt. Irvin. He did 2 tours of duty in Vi. He was 17 went he went to th. And he is 66 now and just no to tell about it. He receive Force Commendation Medal for Sevice in Bien Hoa Air Base, I was held hostage in Iran for 444 days. Can I get 444 LIKES and Shares". The page also shows community statistics, including 195,551 people like this and 196,829 people follow this. The right sidebar displays "YOUR PAGES" and "CONTACTS".

Addendum 2: Screenshot of “Vietnam Vets of America” September 26, 2017 “Facebook Live” video which was pre-recorded and had the caption “Do you think the criminals must suffer?”



Addendum 3: New logo for “Vietnam-Veterans.org” compared to logo of “Vietnam Vets of America.”



Addendum 4: Screenshot of “Nam Vets” Facebook page using VVA’s registered trademark and logo.



Addendum 5: Sharing of news content regarding proposed cuts to veterans benefits six months after the fact is a deceptive use of facts which is likely to incite reactions from the veteran community. December 27, 2017 posting of the copied *Stars and Stripes* article that was originally written on May 23, 2017.

