



Testimony of Christopher Purdy

Director of Veterans for American Ideals and Outreach
Human Rights First

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in
Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism

March 31, 2022

Introduction

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and members of the committee: thank you for the opportunity to appear here today to discuss an urgent threat facing our veteran community and our nation. My name is Chris Purdy, and I'm the Director of Veterans for American Ideals and Outreach at Human Rights First. Veterans for American Ideals is a coalition of veterans and allies who continue their service to America by upholding, defending, and advocating for human rights at home and abroad. I served in the United States Army National Guard from 2004 to 2012, and deployed to Iraq as part of a Convoy Escort Team in 2011.

This generation of veterans, like those who came before us, are bonded by shared experience. We speak a common language, share a worldview grounded in public service, and are committed to building a better world grounded in democratic ideals. We know that veterans are more likely to engage in volunteer efforts¹, be leaders in their community, have more tendencies to be bipartisan². We saw an example of this last August when veterans from across the political spectrum came together to rescue our Afghan allies in the Kabul evacuation³. That moment exemplified the power for good that a united veteran community can have. Unfortunately, that has become an exception rather than the norm.

There is a concerted effort to turn veterans against the democratic ideals we swore to defend. That effort is rooted in intentional misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information campaigns that advance an agenda to set veterans against one another and against other elements of society to hinder us from acting collectively for the good of our country.

Veterans are targeted because we hold a special and unique place in our society and public life. This generation of service members voluntarily joined a wartime military knowing the sacrifices we would have to make. We joined knowing that we would likely deploy overseas, but that we had the support of the American public. We believed service to be the highest form of sacrifice and that our nation saw military service as distinct and honorable. We served at home and abroad under a shared set of values: selfless sacrifice, duty, and personal courage.

When we returned from overseas deployments, veterans maintained that credibility in civilian life. The civilian community extended generous thanks to veterans, and we became credible spokespeople for American ideals. We are grateful for our nation's thanks and veterans have generally done our best to use this respected social position for good.

Others noticed this gratitude and acted to exploit, co-opt, and commodify the veteran community. Commercial brands try to cash in on veterans' desire to maintain their service-based identities.

¹ Nesbit, Rebecca, and David A. Reingold. "Soldiers to Citizens: The Link between Military Service and Volunteering." *Public Administration Review* 71, no. 1 (2011): 67–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41061156>.

² G. Lee Robinson et al., "Veterans and Bipartisanship," *Armed Forces & Society* 46, no. 1 (November 2018): pp. 132-162, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327x18806515>.

³ Megan K. Stack, "The Veterans Struggling to Save Afghan Allies," *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-veterans-struggling-to-save-afghan-allies>.

Social media personalities promote veterans and the veteran brand to develop large followings under the guise of “supporting the troops.” Veteran status became something that could be packaged, marketed, and sold on a T-shirt or in a bag of coffee⁴. Commodifying veteran status is dangerous because it allows people to purchase proximity and some have used it for nefarious purposes.

Bad actors recruit veterans to make use of our credibility. Anti-government and white nationalist organizations whose agendas mask themselves in patriotic rhetoric but are rooted in white supremacy rather than patriotism have targeted veterans to be the faces and promoters of their movements. Online and off, these groups groom and recruit veterans by exploiting cultural grievances to push veterans toward extremism and extremist circles.

First, they encourage our community to be distrustful of our government and our fellow citizens, then they provide outlets and echo chambers where this distrust builds. Finally, they invite these radicalized veterans into a movement that espouses that same distrust, sometimes violently. As politics have polarized, we have seen politicians use the same strategy of activating veterans to further their aims.

Those who would undercut our democracy, oppose racial and religious diversity, and challenge the idea of pluralism are unpatriotic and anti-American. This country’s ideals are grounded in the motto *e pluribus unum*, “out of many, one,” and history has shown that America is greatest when we celebrate our diversity. Yet these extremists manipulate veterans’ voices to further their destructive anti-American aims. While they feint sharing veterans’ values of duty, honor, and sacrifice, the anti-government militias, extremist organizations, and their supporters are not patriots and do not share American values.

It is the responsibility of real patriots to hold these bad actors accountable and hold our leaders to real American ideals. Most of the veterans recruited into extremist activity were done so deceptively, and now they must have an opportunity to learn the truth: that reactionary violence is not the way to love and preserve our country. Through community outreach, social connection, and even the use of government resources, veterans must work with veterans to turn them away from violent extremism and back toward democratic action. If we do not, we risk the disintegration of the fabric of America, and the Balkanization of our social life – a truly dangerous proposition.

This Congress must respond with solutions. If we do not invest in preventative and restorative policies, we risk this and future generations of veterans continuing to fall prey to violent anti-government actors. We must inoculate those most at risk from being radicalized and invest in services to help those who have gone astray. To that end, we recommend facilitation and oversight of voter education campaigns to specifically reach veterans, investigation of foreign and domestic disinformation campaigns that target the veteran community, and broad support for community service programs for veterans.

⁴ Jason Zengerle, “Can the Black Rifle Coffee Company Become the Starbucks of the Right?,” The New York Times (The New York Times, July 14, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/14/magazine/black-rifle-coffee-company.html>.

If we do not take action, those who attempted to violently circumvent the Constitution on January 6th or rallied for White Nationalism in Charlottesville in 2017 will continue their destructive anti-American actions. They will continue to exploit the cycle of usurping veterans' honorable status, the commodification of that status, and then radicalization to foment more violent attacks on our society.



If we do not take action, we risk a generational, asymmetric conflict between Americans, fought online and in the streets. We also risk this anti-democratic virus spreading from the veteran community to our active duty military, where it can only have a degrading effect on troop readiness and national security. We risk weakening and further dividing America, failing in our promise to protect our own.

How Veterans are Targeted for Radicalization

In his 2016 book *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, Sebastian Junger explains all humans' innate desire for community, but he sees the veteran experience as unique. The military trains individuals to seek out and depend on community in ways that other Americans do not. When reintegrating into civilian society, veterans often find that sense of community and belonging lacking. Junger writes, "Today's veterans often come home to find that, although they're willing to die for their country, they're not sure how to live for it."⁵

Disinformation targeted at veterans exploits this desire for community by counterintuitively encouraging us to see ourselves as apart, different, and aggrieved. This action is intentional and predatory: it exploits veterans' need for community and drives us into unhealthy spaces.

While veterans are unique, this problem is not. Experts have been warning about the effects of disinformation campaigns for years. In 2019, Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) published a report⁶ detailing the different ways that servicemembers, veterans, and their families are targeted online by foreign elements. Experts from VVA and Graphika have previously explained to this committee⁷ that veterans are not uniquely prone to radicalization as a result of our service, but that we are targeted because of our service.

⁵ Sebastian Junger, *Tribe on Homecoming and Belonging* (New York: Twelve, 2016).

⁶ Kristopher Goldsmith, September 17, 2019, <https://84df94ee36.nxcli.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/VVA-Investigation.pdf>.

⁷ U.S. Congress. House of Representatives. Hijacking Our Heroes: Exploiting Veterans Through Disinformation On Social Media. 116th Congress, First Session, Nov. 13th, 2019

The veteran community is an “economically efficient target” for those who seek to undermine Americans’ faith in democracy. Veterans are more likely than our civilian peers to serve our communities as volunteers or elected officials, to graduate from college with higher GPAs, and to own our own businesses. Because of Americans’ respect for veterans, we have greater social influence than any other group. Beyond our distinct cultural identity, veterans have significant levels of training and technical skill⁸. These traits and the respect veterans engender are precisely why both foreign and domestic bad actors seek to influence and radicalize us.

VVA’s seminal report showed that social media campaigns by Russia’s foreign intelligence services or malicious domestic political actors often used the same racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and xenophobic messaging and imagery to target veterans and turn us against others in society. Among the most frequent hateful memes⁹ were phrases like “veterans before illegals,” and “veterans not refugees.” These posts offered a false dichotomy of conflict between social groups, and a sense that support for other groups was antithetical to support for veterans. The argument is typical: bad actors seek to convince veterans and other Americans that government support for immigrants and refugees takes away from government support for the VA and veterans. While this premise may seem obviously false to those who understand the budgetary process, those who do not are likely to take it seriously. These hateful messages – disinformation – were often presented in immediate proximity to memes related to veteran suicide to convince veterans and other audiences that choices made by our government, Congress, and individual legislators were responsible for the preventable deaths of veterans and the despondency veterans reading the posts possibly felt as well.

VVA’s two-year investigation found scores of social media pages using the American military or veteran aesthetic but run by administrators outside of the U.S. They often sold merchandise such as t-shirts that displayed these hateful memes and disinformation. The objective of these malignant online actors was to force conflict not just on the internet, but in real life, by normalizing and encouraging veterans to adopt “in-your-face” toxic politics as a lifestyle.

The Efficacy of Online Recruitment

Recruitment methods deployed against veterans are situationally specific, multi-platform, and focus on veterans’ real and perceived grievances. They prioritize action, manipulate veterans’ concepts of civic nationalism, and create an “other” to justify extrajudicial violence. Domestic Violent Extremists (DVE) and Anti-Government Violent Extremists (AGVE) actors often deploy their content in groups that are veteran-focused, veteran-driven, or where members are assumed to have a favorable impression of veterans. The messages are dynamic, meet veterans where they are, praise veterans, and center on veterans’ emotions and grievances.

Online recruitment is one of the most effective methods used by DVE and AGVE groups to convince veterans to join their causes. Though digital platforms are somewhat new, their methods draw on

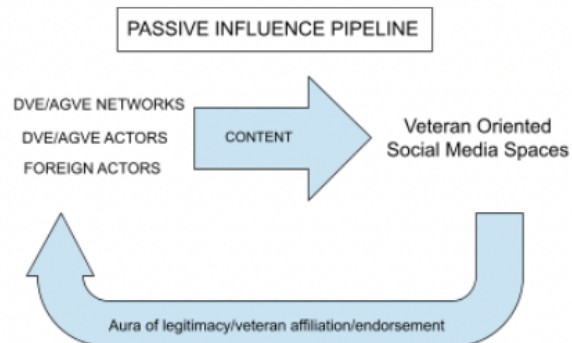
⁸ Steve Beynon, “Why Veterans Are Targeted by Radicals Online,” Military.com, May 28, 2021, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/05/28/why-veterans-are-targeted-radicals-online.html>.

⁹ Meme: photos or illustrations often accompanied by text which are meant to convey a message or idea.

effective messaging and recruitment techniques developed by white supremacists, militias, Christian Identity Extremists, and other DVE/AGVE groups since the mid-1800s. We see four strategies in online radicalization:

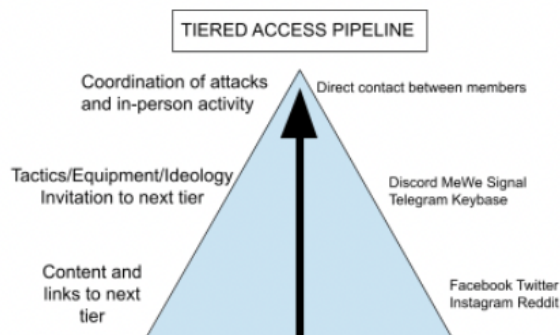
1) **Passive Influence**

This is a low-cost, extremely effective method to shape online narratives. By seeding veterans' online spaces with anti-government messaging, extremist groups and actors imply legitimacy and acceptance of DVE/AGVE rhetoric, aesthetics, and activity by the veteran community.



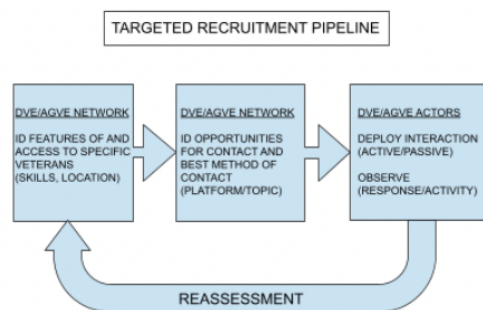
2) **Tiered Access**

For veterans with a pre-existing interest in extremism, this offers a pipeline from audience to action in extremist groups. Starting with public-facing content that leads veterans into encrypted spaces, it allows veterans to feel both safe and connected as they participate more directly in extremism. This approach accelerates and scales very effectively, reinforcing urgency of action and a sense of persecution by law enforcement, as it leads activated veterans to recruit others, plan violence, and take actions that sustain the groups they join.



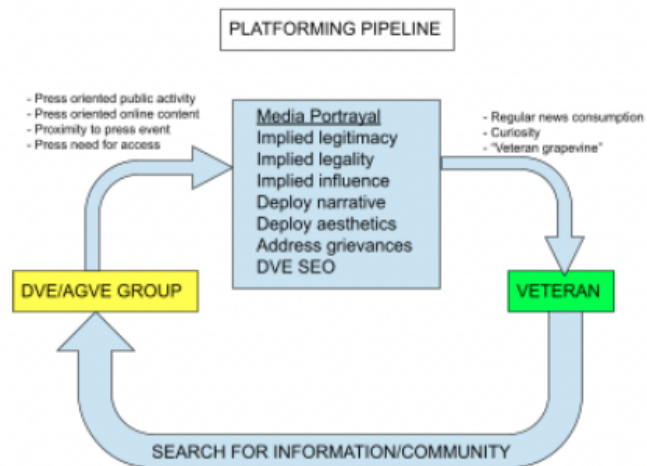
3) **Targeted Recruitment**

This is the digital equivalent of door-knocking, and often is the result of a group's need to acquire a specific skill set to enact a plan for action or violence, or to develop the capacity to do so. It allows DVE/AGVE networks to make highly selective recruitment decisions and test what does and doesn't work when veterans are approached online. It has a very small online footprint, making it difficult to intercept.



4) Platforming

By manipulating media, DVE/AGVE actors maximize their profiles to appeal to veterans. Extremist groups imply their legitimacy, size, effectiveness, influence, and legality by using the news to reach their targets. Because media organizations invest heavily in Search Engine Optimization (SEO), DVE/AGVE groups in the news gain access to veteran audiences that they would not otherwise reach.



The Scope of the Disinformation Problem in the Veteran Community

The veteran community has been targeted by malicious actors using disinformation for decades. VVA's investigation discovered hundreds of Facebook pages and groups catering to American veterans, presented as run domestically by and for our community, but actually controlled by malicious foreign actors. Some of these fraudulent pages and groups were started over ten years ago.

The VVA report also revealed that several of the country's largest and most popular veterans organizations – including those that frequently testify before this committee – had their Facebook followers specifically targeted by ads purchased and created by hostile Russian foreign intelligence services.

The report explained that these entities injected politically divisive, disinformation-based ads not just to undermine trust in government institutions like the VA, this committee, Democrats and Republicans, but to inspire veterans to take up arms against their fellow citizens.

One of the most obvious and longstanding sources of disinformation that targets American veterans to erode our faith in government and our democracy is an outlet called *Veterans Today*. Like the most sophisticated and persistent malign foreign-controlled websites and social media pages identified in VVA's report, *Veterans Today* builds trust among veterans by frequently posting accurate information about veteran's benefits¹⁰ or current events important to the community.¹¹

¹⁰ Veterans Today (@veteranstoday). "NATO Chief Says 100,000 US Troops Now in Europe as Russia Continues Its Special Op in Ukraine <https://tinyurl.com/yd5e45ar> #NATO #RUSSIAN_DEFENCE_MINISTRY #UKRAINE". Twitter, 3/19/2022, https://twitter.com/veteranstoday/status/1505159071934005250?s=20&t=45dphe9ca0ubzVnQS_wptA

¹¹ Veterans Today (@veteranstoday). "No Survivors: US Marine Osprey Goes Down off Norway <https://tinyurl.com/y9hvs75d> #NATO #NORWAY_DRILL #OSPREY_CRASH #US_MARINE_CORPS". Twitter, 3/20/2022, https://twitter.com/veteranstoday/status/1505547006730592265?s=20&t=45dphe9ca0ubzVnQS_wptA

Their disinformation-based efforts were widely revealed in a June 2017 *Politico Magazine* article, “How Russia Targets the U.S. Military: With hacks, pro-Putin trolls and fake news, the Kremlin is ratcheting up its efforts to turn American servicemembers and veterans into a fifth column.”¹² The piece begins:

In the fall of 2013, *Veterans Today*, a fringe American news site that also offers former service members help finding jobs and paying medical bills, struck up a new partnership. It began posting content from *New Eastern Outlook*, a geopolitical journal published by the government-chartered Russian Academy of Sciences, and running headlines like “Ukraine’s Ku Klux Klan — NATO’s New Ally.” As the United States confronted Russian ally Bashar Assad for using chemical weapons against Syrian children this spring, the site trumpeted, “Proof: Turkey Did 2013 Sarin Attack and Did This One Too” and “Exclusive: Trump Apologized to Russia for Syria Attack.”

The Ukrainian Klan-focused article in the Kremlin-backed *Veterans Today*/*New Eastern Outlook*¹³ referenced in *Politico* is an example of how American veterans have been targeted since at least 2014 with the same “de-Nazify Ukraine” propaganda that Putin is using now to justify his criminal invasion and genocide against Ukraine.



While the *Politico* research is older, Russia’s destabilization campaign continues. In the last weeks, the homepage of *Veterans Today* has hosted disinformation focused on Ukraine: accusing the U.S. and NATO of supporting Nazis, of committing war crimes, and of planning to use weapons of mass destruction.¹⁴ At the height of the pandemic, *Veterans Today* launched a disinformation campaign that promoted vaccine skepticism and attempted to undermine trust in the VA.

We should not view the objective of these campaigns solely in their geopolitical contexts, we must also consider the domestic implications of veterans adopting these stories as fact. As part of the Kremlin’s long-standing effort to undermine American unity, Russia is trying to sabotage veterans’ health by arguing that our government is pushing dangerous injections and working to convince us that the United States is supporting the Ukrainian KKK.

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

¹³Jim Dean, “Ukraine’s Ku Klux Klan – NATO’s New Ally,” *New Eastern Outlook*, March 25, 2014, <https://journal-neo.org/2014/03/25/ukraine-s-ku-klux-klan-nato-s-new-ally/>.

¹⁴“Veterans Today Website Archive Over Time”, Internet Archive https://web.archive.org/web/*/https://www.veteranstoday.com/

Newsy confirmed that *Veterans Today* is directed by Russia's security services, and quoted an email sent by *Veterans Today*'s senior editor Gordon Duff admitting that the site was under federal investigation, with 26 other sites, for its ties to Moscow.¹⁵ Yet *Veterans Today* remains active across over a dozen different websites and social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, LinkedIn, and YouTube. None of these platforms inform users that *Veterans Today* is pushing Kremlin disinformation – often reprinting RT and Sputnik articles – into their feeds.¹⁶

Among *Veterans Today*'s current Twitter followers are:

- Scores of MSOs and VSOs, including over a half dozen Congressionally-chartered SOs, like Paralyzed Veterans of America, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Blinded Veterans of America, and Military Officers Association of America
- Several dozen official VA accounts
- *Military.com*, *The Warhorse*, *We Are The Mighty*, and other respected veteran-focused news outlets
- HVAC Ranking Member Mike Bost
- Former HVAC Chairman and the highest-ranking enlisted service member ever elected to Congress Tim Walz
- Both Democrats' and Republicans' verified Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs accounts
- The Under Secretary of the U.S. Army, the U.S. Army Soldier for Life account
- Until we were doing research in preparation for this hearing, even our Veterans for American Ideals program followed this account.



How *Veterans Today* amassed its large following is a function of social media algorithms. Many who have followed the account would be suspicious of its content and the anti-American sentiment its authors espouse. But because the *Veterans Today* Twitter account was created in 2008 and has been tweeted over 77,000 times, it has for many years been promoted by Twitter's algorithm as an account that people interested in veterans' issues should follow. A public figure or veterans organization following a Twitter account does not explicitly imply endorsement of its content, but seeing the above list of respected followers, veterans are likely to assume



¹⁵Sasha Ingber, "Veteran-Focused Website Is Run by Russia and Pushes Vaccine Skepticism," *Newsy* (Newsy, March 18, 2021), <https://www.newsy.com/stories/u-s-veterans-website-secretly-directed-by-russia/>.

¹⁶ Twitter Safety issues a warning to users who click on

that *Veterans Today* is a reputable source when the algorithm pushes it into their feeds.

Veterans Today is just one of many sources of disinformation and division that target veterans. The collective impact of tens of thousands of false news stories and divisive social media posts over so many years is impossible to measure, but it is clear that *Veterans Today's* objectives are destructive to our democracy, faith in government, and national unity.

Online Radicalization and How Civil Society is Responding

Civil society has taken notice of the ever-growing threat that online radicalization poses to our veteran community. Over the last few years, the team at Human Rights First has worked to identify bad actors and their engagement and recruitment of veterans. In one research project, we analyzed a data set of nearly 25,000 dues-paying members of the Oathkeepers, many recruited online. Of those, nearly 16,000, or roughly 65% identified themselves as being active-duty members of the military or veteran community. That nearly two-thirds of the membership we were able to study of this anti-government militia had served in our military is a clear warning that we face a profound problem with extremism permeating this honored and respected culture.

Our research showed that these extremists existed in every branch and level of the military. In April 2021, when the Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command told *Stars and Stripes*¹⁷ that he had no extremists under his command, we pointed to a retired Navy O-6 who then worked as a civilian program analyst at STRATCOM.

Human Rights First is currently analyzing nearly half a terabyte of open-sourced data related to Patriot Front, the most active hate group in the U.S., organized by neo-Nazis in the wake of the DVE/AGVE events in Charlottesville in 2017. One in five applicants to Patriot Front have claimed a military or veteran association,¹⁸ and we are documenting how this white supremacist group has co-opted military skill sets to train non-veteran members to engage in physical violence.

Human Rights First conducts these investigations in many ways. In our Innovation Lab¹⁹ we build proprietary research tools, engage tech-focused volunteers with varied skillsets and backgrounds, and train veterans in open-sourced intelligence gathering techniques. Currently, our tools include:

- **SurvAI** automatically detects and categorizes violence in video, dramatically enhancing investigative capability in cases of unlawful violence. The tool is currently being used by investigations into the January 6 insurrection, state-sanctioned violence against Black Lives Matter protestors at Lafayette square, and violent domestic extremist groups.

¹⁷ Caitlin Doornbos, "Stratcom Commander Says There Is 'Zero' Extremism in His Forces Because of 'Higher Standard'," *Stars and Stripes*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/stratcom-commander-says-there-is-zero-extremism-in-his-forces-because-of-higher-standard-1.670809>.

¹⁸ Megan Squire, "One in Five Patriot Front Applicants Claim Military Ties," Southern Poverty Law Center, February 1, 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2022/02/01/one-five-patriot-front-applicants-claim-military-ties>.

¹⁹ "Innovation Lab: Tech for Human Rights," Human Rights First, accessed March 29, 2022, <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/campaigns/innovation-lab-tech-for-human-rights>.

- Journalists and researchers use **Raditube** to track and analyze narratives and the users that spread them on YouTube, the second most visited website in the world. It offers unprecedented early detection of dangerous content, analysis of extremists' content, and maps the channels, users, and narratives that spread harmful content.
- **Blue Witness** captures and analyzes evidence of violent incidents with police as they appear across social media, allowing communities, journalists, and other human rights defenders to hold police officers accountable for their actions.
- **Pyrra**, recently launched as an independent startup, helps protect individuals, corporations, and institutions from threats made online.

Our research and growing data sets allow us to identify online social networks and leaders of these movements. We also monitor hate speech, anti-government coordination, and violent intent, watching for when extremists' discussions cross the line into criminality and violence. Tools like ours, and others in this space, are critical for civil society to understand the breadth and seriousness of the evolving threat of violent extremism, within and outside the veteran community. It allows us to create public messaging and deradicalization strategies that reflect the landscape as it develops.

Restorative Solutions to Veteran Online Radicalization

The only practical solution to this problem is for government and civil society to work together to engage and integrate veterans into their communities. Research has shown that one of the best ways to prevent extremism is to inoculate those most susceptible to that extremism. But once an individual has been targeted with disinformation, it becomes much more difficult to redirect their development. Entrenched extremists need the support of trusted voices to help create identities apart from their extremist beliefs and actions. That requires both an investment of resources and a commitment from all levels of government and society to address this problem with the seriousness it demands.

The veteran engagement that serves at the basis of post-9/11 veteran groups like Team Rubicon²⁰ is a model for deradicalization efforts. That organization taps into the instinctive desire among veterans to serve their community. It should be noted that this is the same impulse that makes participating in extremist groups enticing, but our recommended engagement points this instinct toward community-building exercises that buttress rather than oppose government institutions.

In the past year, Human Rights First developed just such a veteran-based volunteer organization to counter violent extremism (CVE). In partnership with the veteran-owned threat intelligence firm Sparverius²¹, Human Rights First launched a pilot program called Task Force Butler, empowering

²⁰"Built to Serve," Team Rubicon, accessed March 29, 2022, <https://teamrubiconusa.org/>.

²¹"Sparverius," Sparverius, accessed March 29, 2022, <https://www.sparverius.co/>.

veterans by training them in the detection and disruption of a great threat to democracy: disinformation campaigns and domestic extremism.

With service to our nation as a core tenet, Task Force Butler researches, monitors, and interdicts domestic extremism across the country to protect those most often targeted by domestic extremist activity. The online and in-person program was designed to scale and to work with other civil society and pro-democracy organizations. Task Force Butler's goal is not to harm those who have been swayed by misinformation into radicalism but to encourage extremists and those considering extremism to take another path that is safer for them and our communities.

At the same time, we are activating veterans vulnerable to disinformation and extremists' manipulations to find community as they challenge campaigns and recruitment efforts by extremist groups and foreign actors. Former Navy aviators work alongside former infantry Marines to investigate extremist violence and organizations that espouse hate-based politics and want to harm their fellow Americans.

Congressional Recommendations

To best support the veteran community against the effects of disinformation, Human Rights First recommends the following actions:

1. **Facilitate and Oversee Veteran Voter Education Campaigns**

In the lead up to the 2020 election, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) prepared a veteran voter education program in partnership with Vietnam Veterans of America to help enlist its members and social media followers in the “#Protect2020” campaign.²² This education campaign was stymied by partisan appointees who launched it just prior to Election Day, long after many Americans had sent in their ballots. The previous administration's VA refused to respond to VVA's report or help educate veterans about disinformation related to the election.²³



We recommend this Committee ensure that the VA joins in meaningful, permanent partnership with CISA and veterans service organizations to engage veterans in election protection campaigns. We also recommend the Committee ensures that these education

²²Alex Horton, "Veterans Have Been Targets of Foreign Manipulation. Now They're Fighting It before the Election," The Washington Post, October 26, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2020/10/26/veterans-election-disinformation/>.

²³Abbie Bennet, "Foreign Actors Target Veterans with Online Disinformation," Audacy.com, October 26, 2020, <https://www.audacy.com/connectingvets/articles/foreign-actors-target-veterans-with-online-disinformation>.

campaigns are protected from corrupt political influence and obstruction.

2. **Study Foreign and Domestic Targeting of Veterans**

Cited earlier, VVA's 2019 report is the most comprehensive analysis of the use of mainstream social media platforms by foreign entities to target the American military and veterans' community to undermine democracy. The report warned that these entities sought to spread anti-American propaganda and manipulate this community by exploiting and inflaming national divisions.



The involvement of veterans and current service members in the violent assault on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, fueled by a massive disinformation campaign, highlights the real-world dangers posed by the manipulation of our community. That event, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's war against Ukraine have led mainstream social media platforms to enact some reforms and deplatform known sources of disinformation.

Mainstream platforms' actions have not stopped the problems identified in the VVA's report, they have sent malicious actors to alternative platforms and led them to adopt new tactics, techniques, and procedures. Foreign-born predatory campaigns targeting the military and veterans' communities now play out on these alternative platforms, which were developed as a rejection of efforts to fix many of the problems that the VVA's report identified.

These alternative social media platforms operate in relative obscurity, with few government officials having heard of them, let alone having the knowledge to understand how these apps and platforms may be influencing the mission readiness of troops and the wellbeing of veterans.

We strongly recommend the Committee commission an updated report, this time a comprehensive study of the ways that our community is targeted by both foreign and domestic bad actors who push veterans towards extremism. Recognizing that these threats evolve over time, the Committee must undertake continuous research and reporting on these issues.

3. **Broaden Support for Veterans-in-Community-Service Programs**

While the evacuation of vulnerable Afghans has been a difficult experience for the veteran community, it has shown that in times of crisis, veterans put aside their differences and

work together to serve. For years, organizations like Team Rubicon, and others, have shown similar success, deploying veterans around the United States and the world to help others in times of crisis.

Not every veteran can drop everything and dedicate themselves to addressing crises, but the community-building aspects of such actions can be invoked in other ways. We recommend the Committee help to develop and support programs that call veterans to use the skills that they learned in the military and serve in other ways.

Human Rights First and Veterans for American Ideals are facilitating such a call to service, enabling veterans to uphold our oath to the Constitution in meaningful and accessible ways. Our Task Force Butler mobilizes civic-minded veterans to detect and disrupt white nationalist organizations and empowers veterans across the country to keep their communities safe from undemocratic actors and hate groups.

We know that empowering veterans to assess and challenge extremist activity will help to inoculate them from the machinations of hate groups while keeping DVE groups from proliferating in American communities. To that end, we recommend initiating other locally-sourced efforts that reflect veterans' skills and experiences that address our communities' needs.