

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 5, 2020

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 express our concern about your inadequate response and reiterate our previous request to determine what actions the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA or the Department) is taking to educate veterans about online disinformation campaigns and other malign influence operations by Russian, Chinese, and other foreign entities and individuals. Given the urgency of this threat to veterans as the next federal election approaches and the Department's deficient response – which failed to provide a single concrete example of actions taken by VA to address this problem – we are following up on our inquiry to determine if the Department is using available resources effectively and appropriately to protect veterans from foreign malign influence operations that could undermine our democracy.

In November 2019, after the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) released the results of a two-year investigation that “documented persistent, pervasive, and coordinated online targeting of American servicemembers, veterans, and their families by foreign entities who seek to disrupt American democracy,”¹ we wrote to seek information about VA's efforts to combat online disinformation targeting veterans.² Nearly three months later, you responded with the following:

VA continues to support Federal efforts to combat foreign influence by educating Veterans, VA employees, and beneficiaries on threats from foreign influence operations. VA partners with a variety of agencies regarding national security matters and will continue to work on behalf of Veterans, VA employees, and beneficiaries to counter the full spectrum of threats to national security.³

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>.

² Senators' letter to Secretary of Veterans Affairs Wilkie requesting information on VA efforts to protect veterans from foreign online disinformation, November 12, 2019, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2019.11.12%20Letter%20to%20VA%20re%20efforts%20to%20educate%20veterans%20about%20online%20disinformation%20campaigns%20vF.pdf>.

³ Response of Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie, February 6, 2020, [On file with the Office of Senator Elizabeth Warren].

This response was wholly inadequate because it did not describe in any meaningful detail how VA educates veterans on foreign influence operations or supports interagency efforts to address this threat. Moreover, it is silent on what specific actions, if any, VA has taken to implement the recommendations of the Vietnam Veterans of America.

In contrast, the Department of Defense (DoD), in response to a concurrent inquiry from us regarding its efforts to protect servicemembers from this threat, noted it is conducting a detailed review, required by the *Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 National Defense Authorization Act*,⁴ of “existing programs, tools, and resources of the [DoD] for training members of the Armed Forces [...] regarding the threat of disinformation campaigns specifically targeted at such individuals,” and will be providing Congress with a report on the findings of this review.⁵

With less than eight months until the next federal election, VA’s vague and wholly inadequate response regarding its efforts to educate veterans about malign influence operations is deeply disturbing, and provides no indication that the Department is taking all reasonable steps to protect veteran communities from this threat.

Veterans represent an important part of efforts to educate Americans about malign influence operations online. The chief investigator and author of the VVA report recently observed in congressional testimony that “[v]eterans are more likely than any other demographic in the US to vote, run for office, and motivate others to vote, [their] opinions and political beliefs are generally highly respected across the entire political spectrum, and as a result, [their] behavior often influences the behavior of those around us.”⁶ In addition, Facebook’s head of security policy recently testified that “individuals and groups that are considered trustworthy, like veterans, are more likely to be the targets” of malign influence campaigns.⁷

VA must take quick and decisive actions to meet this challenge. Given that malicious foreign actors are targeting veterans through disinformation on social media platforms and other online tools in relation to the upcoming federal election and that the Department’s response did not meaningfully address our initial inquiry into this matter, we reiterate our request that VA address the following questions as soon as possible:

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

⁴ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Section 567, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1790/text?format=txt>.

⁵ Response of Matthew P. Donovan, Performing the Duties of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, January 15, 2020, [On file with the Office of Senator Elizabeth Warren].

⁶ Written testimony of Kristofer Goldsmith, Chief Investigator/Associate Director for Policy and Government Affairs, Vietnam Veterans of America, to the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, November 13, 2019, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR00/20191113/110183/HHRG-116-VR00-Wstate-GoldsmithK-20191113.pdf>.

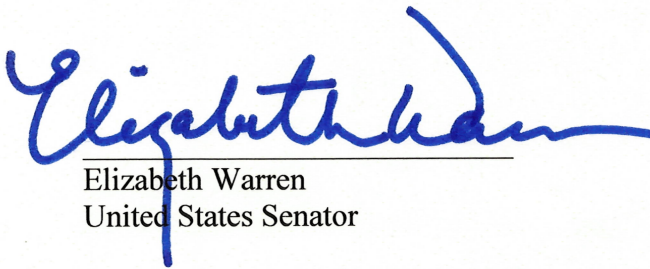
⁷ Written testimony of Nathaniel Gleicher, Head of Security Policy, Facebook, to the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, November 13, 2019, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR00/20191113/110183/HHRG-116-VR00-Wstate-GleicherN-20191113.pdf>.


veterans on personal cybersecurity: how to mitigate vulnerabilities, vigilantly maintain safe practices, and recognize threats, including how to identify instances of online manipulation”⁸


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,⁹ 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.

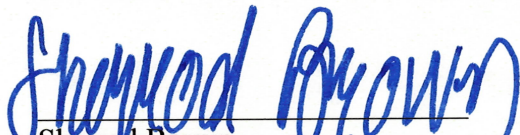
Sincerely,

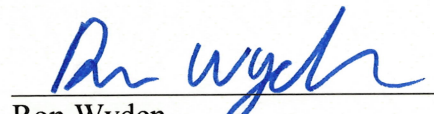

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United States Senator


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United States Senator


Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator


Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator


Sherrod Brown
United States Senator


Ron Wyden
United States Senator

⁸ 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>.

⁹ 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>.

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