



## PRESS RELEASE

Vietnam Veterans of America

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### **VVA Calls on Government to Investigate Foreign Elements Targeting Troops/Vets Online**

(Washington, D.C.)--"As [The Wall Street Journal](#) published today, for over a year, VVA has been quietly waging war against foreign elements who seek to target troops and veterans with disinformation and divisive content," said John Rowan, president of Vietnam Veterans of America. "Now we're ready to redouble our calls-for action: we request that the Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs lead in the coordination of efforts by the federal government to protect our community from foreign influence and exploitation."

"We've analyzed hundreds of Facebook Pages and Twitter Accounts, scores of deceitful websites, and thousands of individual posts. We have concluded that despite recent purges of hostile actors from, and reforms to, these online platforms — our community remains a vulnerable target for exploitation and manipulation by foreign entities," said Rowan.

A 2017 Oxford University study, "[Junk News on Military Affairs and National Security: Social Media Disinformation Campaigns Against US Military Personnel and Veterans](#)," determined that "the public tends to place trust in military personnel and veterans, making them potentially influential voters and community leaders." The abstract continues, "Given this trust and their role in ensuring national security, these individuals have the potential to become particular targets for influence operations and information campaigns conducted on social media."

[As we explained in our report for congress and various federal agencies in March 2018](#), in August of 2017 VVA first discovered an imposter Facebook Page called "Vietnam Vets of America," which had at times used VVA's official logo to deceive people into believing the Page represented a legitimate veterans' organization. The Page built trust among American veterans by producing unique content featuring Vietnam veterans and posting information relevant to the community. The page engaged in creating sensationalized and manipulated news in order to sow division and anger among American veterans.

The imposter "Vietnam Veterans of America" Page used unique tactics to manipulate the "Facebook Live" feature, as they did to run a 58-second local-media clip about vandalism of a Vietnam Veteran Monument for four hours, with the caption "Do you think the criminals must suffer?" imposed over the video. While the short story that a local media organization created was true, it had been altered and repurposed to make a minor local story go viral. By faking a live video, this foreign entity was able to take advantage of Facebook's algorithms, exposing

hundreds of thousands of Americans to divisive political propaganda created by entities outside of the United States. This organic content had much greater reach than many of the paid ads that were so infamously promoted by Facebook Pages affiliated with Russia's Internet Research Agency.

In March 2018, VVA discovered two other imposter Pages targeting American Vietnam veterans operated by the same entity. One of these Pages was created in 2015, again using VVA's logo, and with a new website "[VietnamVeterans.org](http://VietnamVeterans.org)" which was registered by one "Nikoli Mitov" in Bulgaria. Without specialized skills and resources, our investigation of this entity could go no further.

In the following months we have discovered dozens of similar pages that are targeting American veterans with divisive political content. Our investigation is ongoing, but we have found over two dozen Pages targeting American veterans which together have over 100 foreign admins, with locations on 6 continents and in 26 different countries outside of the United States. Many of these Pages have paid for and displayed ads which include politically sensitive topics. On these Pages, American veterans are often encouraged to share personal information and photographs of themselves in uniform, which can then be harvested by these foreign entities for further use.

VVA has been providing information from our investigation directly to Facebook's Threat Intel Team, and to date our reporting has resulted in the closure of several Pages which deceptively targeted service members and veterans. As a result, we have liberated from foreign influence over twenty-million users who followed these Pages — but we believe that we've only addressed a fraction of the problem.

"We're thankful to the Threat Intelligence Team at Facebook, and the Site Integrity Team at Twitter, both of whom have taken this problem seriously," Rowan continued. "But this is not a private-sector problem. This is an issue of national security, and affects the wellbeing of American troops and veterans. That's why we're asking for the blame game to end, and for America's government to step up and protect our population from being targeted by foreign elements who seek to do us harm."