

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 26, 2020

The Honorable Mark T. Esper
Secretary
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

The Honorable John Ratcliffe
Director
Office of the Director of National Intelligence
1500 Tysons McLean Drive
McLean, VA 22102

The Honorable Christopher A. Wray
Director
Federal Bureau of Investigation
935 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20535

General Paul M. Nakasone
Commander
U.S. Cyber Command
Fort George G. Meade
Maryland, 20755

The Honorable Chad F. Wolf
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
3801 Nebraska Ave NW
Washington, DC 20016

Dear Secretary Esper, Director Ratcliffe, Director Wray, General Nakasone, and Acting Secretary Wolf:

As leaders of the agencies primarily charged with combatting foreign disinformation, we urge you to take additional measures to fight influence campaigns aimed at disenfranchising voters, especially voters of color, ahead of the 2020 election.

During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, intelligence officials have warned against disinformation campaigns from Russia, China, and Iran that seek to undermine the United States and our allies.¹ As many states change voting procedures to protect voters from the coronavirus, experts have warned that disinformation is an increased threat.² As the general election approaches, it is vital that the federal government does everything in its power to ensure our elections are free and fair.

¹ Edward Wong, Matthew Rosenberg, Julian E. Barnes. *Chinese Agents Helped Spread Messages that Sowed Virus Panic in U.S., Officials Say*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/us/politics/coronavirus-china-disinformation.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>

² Eric Tucker, Amanda Seitz. *Vote-by-mail Debate Raises Fears of Election Disinformation*, <https://apnews.com/ee8dd4051a53b5e7471c8a6a2ca1b8f3>

Spencer P. Boyer. *Here We Go Again: Russia Gears Up to Interfere in 2020 Election with Coronavirus Disinformation*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/30/2020-election-interference-russian-coronavirus-disinformation/>

Ciara Torres-Spelliscy. *A Pandemic, an Election, and a Census*, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/pandemic-election-and-census>

Intelligence officials have confirmed that our elections were attacked by Russia in 2016, and that our elections continue to remain a target of foreign adversaries. In last year's World Wide Threat Assessment, the Director of National Intelligence warned that ahead of the upcoming elections foreign adversaries, "will use online influence operations to try to weaken democratic institutions, undermine U.S. alliances and partnerships and shape policy outcomes in the United States."³

The disinformation campaigns conducted against the 2016 election were specifically designed to divide Americans and mislead voters and those efforts continue to this day. Between 2013 and 2018, Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) conducted Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter campaigns that reached tens of millions of users in the United States. Those accounts spread divisive content meant to pit Americans against each other, and they transmitted misleading information designed to disenfranchise minority groups. Over 30 million users, between 2015 and 2017, shared the IRA's Facebook and Instagram posts.⁴

In the Senate Intelligence Committee's second volume on Russian interference in the 2016 election, the Committee found that:

“No single group of Americans was targeted by IRA information operatives more than African-Americans. By far, race and related issues were the preferred target of the information warfare campaign designed to divide the country in 2016. Evidence of the IRA's overwhelming operational emphasis on race is evident in the IRA's Facebook advertisement content (over 66 percent contained a term related to race) and targeting (locational targeting was principally aimed at African Americans in key metropolitan areas...”⁵

In October 2018, the Eastern District of Virginia's indictment of the IRA's accountant indicated that one of the goals of the influence campaigns ahead of the 2018 mid-term elections was to “effectively aggravate the conflict between minorities and the rest of the population.”⁶

As our country grapples with systemic racism and inequality, we cannot allow foreign adversaries to further divide our country and undermine our democracy.⁷ On June 9, 2020, the

³ Daniel R. Coats. *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>

⁴ United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. *Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election – Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media with Additional Views*, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf

⁵ United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. *Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election – Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media with Additional Views*, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf

⁶ United States of America versus Elena Alekseevna Khusyaynova, Eastern District of Virginia, Case No. 1 :18-MJ-464, October 19, 2018. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edva/press-release/file/1102591/download>

⁷ AVAAZ. *Anti-Racism Protests: Divisive disinformation narratives go viral on Facebook, racking up over 26 million views*, https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/anti_protest_disinformation/

Givi Gigitashvili. *Russia, China, Iran Exploit George Floyd Protests in U.S.*, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/russia-china-iran-exploit-george-floyd-protests-in-u-s-6d2a5e56c7b9>;

Zach Dorfman. *Why Russia will keep poking America's racial wounds*, <https://www.axios.com/russian-interference-2020-election-racial-injustice-7fa6a49b-03b4-4dc6-898d-fa589f9f0e6a.html>

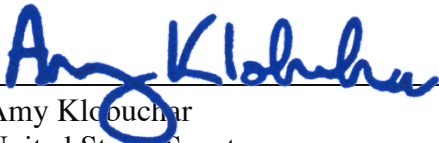
Department of Homeland Security warned that it is seeing disinformation campaigns taking advantage of the situation and using it to further sow discord among the American people.⁸

With fewer than six months remaining until the general election, it is vital that your agencies act to combat disinformation from foreign adversaries, especially information designed to disenfranchise voters. We urge that that additional measures taken include ensuring:

- The American people and political candidates are promptly informed about the targeting of our political processes by foreign malign actors, and that the public is provided regular periodic updates about such efforts leading up to the general election.
- Members of Congress and congressional staff are appropriately and adequately briefed on continued findings and analysis involving election related foreign disinformation campaigns and the work of each agency and department to combat these campaigns.
- Findings and analysis involving election related foreign disinformation campaigns are shared with civil society organizations and independent researchers to the maximum extent which is appropriate and permissible.
- Secretary Esper and Director Ratcliffe implement a social media information sharing and analysis center (ISAC) to detect and counter information warfare campaigns across social media platforms as authorized by section 5323 of the Fiscal Year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act.
- Director Ratcliffe implement the Foreign Malign Influence Response Center to coordinate a whole of government approach to combatting foreign malign influence campaigns as authorized by section 5322 of the Fiscal Year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

/s/

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

/s/

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

⁸ Josh Margolin, Lucien Bruggeman. *Intel bulletin warns of 'malign actors' targeting US over George Floyd fallout*, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/intel-bulletin-warns-malign-actors-targeting-us-george/story?id=71184163>;

/s/

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/s/

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

/s/

Mazie Hirono
United States Senator

/s/

Jack Reed
United States Senator

/s/

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

/s/

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

/s/

Patrick Leahy
United States Senator

/s/

Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

/s/

Tina Smith
United States Senator

/s/

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

/s/

Cory A. Booker
United States Senator