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SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE 2020 ELECTION

Statement by Brian Corley

With the completion and release of the special counsel report on interference and meddling during the 2016 Election Cycle, Robert Mueller's last words on the subject were as follows, "I will close by reiterating the central allegation of our indictments... there were multiple, systematic efforts to interfere in our election and that allegation deserves the attention of every American."

The report's conclusion echoed the unanimous assessment of the entire United States intelligence community. It is undeniable that there was interference and meddling during the 2016 election cycle by nefarious actors. The goal was threefold: erode voter confidence, attempt to delegitimize the winner, and polarize the American electorate. Amazingly, this was accomplished through fake Twitter and Facebook accounts, and by spending millions of dollars in advertising meant to influence users. As an example, over 72,000 Americans RSVP'd to a political rally that was completely fake and was created through a bogus Facebook account that originated from another country. In creating and using fake Facebook and Twitter accounts, these bad actors planted seeds of propaganda, untruths, and rhetoric that millions of American voters unknowingly perpetuated by "Re-tweeting," "Sharing" or "Liking".

As an election administrator in the nation's largest battleground state, please know my team and I are highly cognizant of the ongoing and evolving threats to election's security. We have been working extensively for some time with our state and federal partners, including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). In fact, DHS has been invaluable to our office in preparing for and ensuring response to a myriad of threats. We have modeled our approach with focus on Prevention, Mitigation and Response to both physical and cyber threats, and we continue to be hypervigilant to these real and emerging threats.

In the 2018 General Election cycle, we received reports from voters that were contacted via text message that they had not returned their vote-by-mail ballot. In many cases, our records showed that the voter hadn't requested a vote-by-mail ballot, and others had already returned theirs. The texts had no disclaimer and were generated from out-of-town phone numbers which made it impossible to identify the source. While not necessarily nefarious, it was deeply concerning to voters and caused further erosion of voter confidence.

A major concern for the 2020 election cycle is the continued misuse and manipulation of social media. Before you "Retweet," "Like" or "Share" something relating to voting/elections, et cetera, please be sure it's accurate information. I was personally made aware of many inaccuracies on social media during the 2018 midterms, and my advice for 2020 is when in doubt, verify the accuracy. If it's a voting or election related issue in Pasco County or Florida, please contact my office and we can research or confirm the accuracy or inaccuracy. If you get an unsolicited text message regarding your voter status or vote-by-mail ballot, please verify the information with us at www.pascovotes.com or call us at 800-851-8754.

While our founding fathers welcomed debate in the public discourse, let us be united in the core belief that external meddling and interference are not reliable and acceptable sources for us. Through continual polarization and the practice of talking AT each other rather than TO each other, we let the nefarious actors win! Let's all be mindful of what we read on social media and be guarded in what we share. My staff and I are only a click or phone call away, and we stand ready to assist.

June 10, 2019



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