

After Report That Trump Disparaged War Dead, Democrats See Chance to Win Over Military Voters

Liberal groups had already ramped up efforts to win over veterans and military families in swing states, where even a small shift could prove decisive.

By Jennifer Steinhauer

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WASHINGTON — Long before The Atlantic published an article on Thursday night depicting President Trump disparaging America's war dead, liberal veterans groups had been feverishly working in battleground states to appeal to veterans and military family members, a cornerstone of President Trump's base.

That effort got a significant jolt in both interest and money, and the attention of Joseph R. Biden Jr., in the hours after the article appeared.

By Friday morning, Democrats, especially those with a military background, were reacting with both outrage and a sense of opportunity, denouncing Mr. Trump in news conferences and press releases and assuring veterans and military families that they had their backs.

Mr. Biden, the Democratic nominee for president, lashed out at Mr. Trump on Friday afternoon in a speech in Wilmington, Del., noting that the remarks attributed to the president were part of a long pattern of dismissing military families and their concerns.

"If what is written in The Atlantic is true, it's disgusting," Mr. Biden said. "And it affirms what most of us believe to be true: that Donald Trump is not fit to do the job of president, to be the commander in chief."

In recent months, political groups devoted to veteran and military families have raised millions of dollars to target veterans with advertising, working with the types of sophisticated data lists usually used by Democrats to go after minority and swing voters.

On Friday, less than 12 hours after The Atlantic published its article, the largest liberal veteran organization, VoteVets, released an online ad featuring the parents of troops slain in Iraq and Afghanistan, one speaking in Spanish. In the first five hours after it went up, the group said it raised \$100,000 from 2,500 donors.

The Democratic Party is also leaning heavily on its most popular veterans, like Senator Tammy Duckworth of Illinois and Pete Buttigieg, the former mayor of South Bend, Ind., and a former Democratic presidential candidate, to attack the president on his treatment of veterans and the military — something that would traditionally be a strength for an incumbent Republican president but which is increasingly becoming a weak spot for Mr. Trump. Over 70 current and former elected Democrats with national security backgrounds also released an open letter to Mr. Trump seeking an apology.

"For years there has been a movement away from the old assumption that the Republican Party is the party of national security," Mr. Buttigieg said. "These revelations help push that over the tipping point." He added, "I think that voters need to hear from those who did serve. I am planning to be part of a chorus of veterans from different generations speaking to why this is wrong."

The idea is not to win a majority of the veteran vote, which most Democrats consider nearly impossible, but to peel away a small percentage of persuadable veterans and military family members. While Mr. Trump's popularity has fallen steadily among troops over the past four years, according to polls, it remains high compared with other subsets of voters.

But in an election that will be won on the margins in key battleground states, Democrats are hoping small movements will help, especially in states like North Carolina, Florida and Arizona, where in 2016 Mr. Trump won twice as many voters with a military background than Hillary Clinton did. In such states, a small number of veteran and military votes, supplementing a base of Black and Hispanic voters, could be enough for Democrats to win.

"In a close race, everything and everyone matters," said Nathan Gonzales, the editor of Inside Elections, a nonpartisan analysis organization. "We have to remember that Trump did just enough to win in 2016. He won Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Florida by less than two points. Four years later, the president simply doesn't have any margin for error. He really can't afford to slip with any voter group, including military families and veterans, because he's not doing dramatically better with a specific demographic to balance it out."



President Trump in 2018 at a commemoration ceremony at the American Cemetery in Suresnes, France. Tom Brenner for The New York Times

The report by The Atlantic's editor in chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, said that Mr. Trump decided against visiting a cemetery for American soldiers killed in World War I during a 2018 visit to France because he did not believe it was important to honor the war dead. The report, which Mr. Trump vigorously denied, also suggested that Mr. Trump privately referred to American soldiers killed in combat as “losers” and “suckers.”

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Mr. Trump is currently running a handful of military-focused ads on Facebook that proudly note that he has killed terrorists, “rebuilt our military” and “repaired a broken V.A.”

For many of the nation's 20 million veterans — a mostly heterogeneous group that voted disproportionately for Mr. Trump in 2016 — the problem is not Mr. Trump's regular drip of insensitive remarks about troops, veterans and other military leaders. Rather, it is his constant disparaging of his perceived political enemies, his party's failure to move the needle on health care costs and their attempts to undo the Affordable Care Act and other topics that have also registered with other key voting groups, like suburban women.

Some polling from conservative groups shows that there is as much as 80 percent approval for Mr. Trump's policies among people with a military background, even as his overall approval ratings among them hover closer to 60 percent.

It's numbers like those that make strategists hopeful.

“We don't need a 10 percent swing with veterans,” said Fred Wellman, an Army veteran and the senior adviser for veterans affairs for the Lincoln Project, a Republican-led effort to unseat Mr. Trump.

There has long been a distinct divide between high-ranking current and former military officials, many of whom long ago lost faith in Mr. Trump, some of them quite publicly, and the enlisted ranks, where his support may remain vigorous. Further, a vote lost to Mr. Trump does not necessarily translate into a vote for Mr. Biden; many of these voters disgusted with the president may simply abstain.

Still, groups like the Lincoln Project, and liberal veterans groups, are leaning heavily into Mr. Trump's attempts to divert funds from military projects to pay for a border wall, for instance, or the poor state of military housing.

“The military community is somewhere between 28 to 30 million people,” Mr. Wellman said. “Then add in patriotic Americans. The majority of veteran and active duty members are Republicans, yes, but we just ask them why our military is living in moldy housing and Gold Star families treated like this? One to four percent is all we need.” He added that the group's town hall meeting with veterans attracted 10,000 viewers on Tuesday.

VoteVets has raised \$2 million so far to target voters in 16 battleground states with high concentrations of veteran and military family voters, largely by sending other veterans their way to prod them. The goal is to reach out to at least 250,000 voters by Election Day.

The group has retained Chuck Rocha, who was the architect of Senator Bernie Sanders's outreach to Latino voters, to help amass a database of veterans and military voters who have reached out to VoteVets via social media, texts and other means.

"What we used to put it in TV commercials now goes to hundreds of vets texting and calling other veterans," then following up at times with lengthy calls, Mr. Rocha said. "It's the same thing we did with all these volunteers with Bernie, instead of sending postcards they are having conversations with other veterans."

Common Defense, a smaller group than VoteVets and one that leans further to the left, has mobilized volunteers in Arizona, North Carolina and Maine for the closing months of the election in support of Mr. Biden, as well as Democratic nominees for Senate.



Senator Tammy Duckworth, who was wounded in Iraq, has criticized President Trump's handling of issues affecting veterans. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

On a call with reporters set up by the Biden campaign Friday morning, Ms. Duckworth, who was severely wounded while serving as a helicopter pilot in Iraq, took issue with a section of the Atlantic report in which Mr. Trump reportedly shunned the presence of wounded veterans at public events. "I'll take my wheelchair and my titanium legs over his bone spurs any day," she said, referring to the minor ailment Mr. Trump cited to obtain a medical deferment during the Vietnam War.

"The Atlantic story will not move Trump's base," said Jon Soltz, the chairman of VoteVets. "But we're already seeing some early evidence that is a powerful hook to have conversations with persuadable or on-the-fence veterans and military families. And we're clearly not the only ones who understand this. The White House pushback on this story, while likely not effective, has been fast and swift because they know how damaging the story is, too."