

# Bill Kaplan: Johnson distracts instead of focusing on COVID-19 relief

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Both Trump and Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson are political distractors. Trump speculates about blowing up the U.S. Postal Service (rural Wisconsin's lifeline), delaying the presidential election and suggesting he become president for "life". Similarly, Johnson, Chairman of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, wants to hold committee hearings to peddle false conspiracy theories: "I'm (Johnson) here to report today that, unlike the narrative of the press that ... Trump wants to dig up dirt on his 2020 opponent (Joe Biden), what he wants is an accounting of what happened in 2016. Who set (Trump) up? Did things spring from Ukraine?"

However, Johnson let the cat out of the bag: "The more that we expose of the corruption of the transition process between Obama and Trump ...(and) corruption within (intelligence) agencies ... I would think that it would certainly help ... Trump win reelection ... ." The Biden campaign responded: "This damning acknowledgement totally exposes that Ron Johnson's disgraceful conduct is the definition of malfeasance." Moreover, Politico reported that some GOP senators think Johnson's hearings could "backfire" during a pandemic and COVID-19 economic depression.

Utah GOP Senator Mitt Romney said: "From the outset, there was a tendency on the part of (Trump) to dismiss COVID-19 as a threat, not to consider how serious it could become." Trump and Johnson have projected unwarranted optimism, made unproven claims about treatments and tried to normalize COVID-19 deaths by falsely saying that car accidents kill more Americans. The facts are damning. About 5.4 million cases nationally, over 65,000 in Wisconsin. U.S. deaths stand at near 170,000 and 1,000+ in Wisconsin.

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The eye-popping economic fallout led conservative economic writer Robert Samuelson to label it a “pandemic depression” – mass unemployment, more income inequality, flat retail sales and big-name bankruptcies. State farmers, struggling before COVID-19, have taken a body blow. Trump and Johnson’s relentless cheerleading can’t conceal the economic misery and breadlines. And, with tax revenue down state and local governments need at least \$500 billion to avoid budget shortfalls and cutting 3 million jobs.

However, Trump and Johnson don’t want to help. Trump wants to slash a federal \$600 per week jobless benefit to a short-lived \$300 a week benefit. Johnson said: “I hope the (congressional-White House) talks remain broken down.” And, Johnson also opposes the \$600 jobless benefit, calling it a “perverse disincentive to return to the workplace ... .” But the Wall Street Journal reported: “An overwhelming majority of economists surveyed (by WSJ) said economic benefits of additional jobless benefits to help laid-off workers outweighed concerns that extra payments could deter people from going back to work.”

Johnson should stop blocking COVID-19 relief and recovery aid, and be transparent about how an earlier COVID-19 aid bill expanded the pass-through tax break (70 percent of pass-through income goes to the top one percent). He should try to act like a senator, by using his committee to hold real oversight hearings, e.g., price gouging and fraud in the selling of personal protective equipment and inadequate COVID-19 testing.

*-Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.*