

# Bill Kaplan: U.S. Sen. Johnson doesn't see wrongdoing

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The COVID-19 pandemic continues relentlessly. 1.9 million cases nationally, including 20,500 plus in Wisconsin (WI), about 110,000 U.S. deaths, over 650 in WI. Many states, like WI, are still seeing increases, But the U.S. jobless rate apparently decreased to 13.3 percent, while other data has WI at 14.1 percent. However, 1.9 million Americans applied for jobless benefits last week (42.6 million total since mid-March). “And, the trillions of dollars in government assistance that have helped keep the economy on life support may be nearing their end” (NYT). Moreover, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics confirmed an “error” for April and May; real unemployment rates were actually 19.7 and 16.3 percent respectively!

But Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson will probably not support extending federal unemployment benefits. Heartlessly comparing COVID-19 deaths to car-related accidents, Johnson continues to downplay the pandemic's impact, while persistently serving as a Trump bootlicker. Last Monday, Trump had peaceful demonstrators protesting the police murder of George Floyd, forcibly removed from Lafayette Square across from the White House. Federal law enforcement used batons, pepper spray and rubber bullets to violate the First Amendment. All for a photo-op of Trump walking through the square to St. John's Episcopal Church, where he shamelessly held up a Bible.

“Johnson claimed not to have seen protesters being violently driven back so that ... Trump could walk to the church ...” (NYT). Johnson said: “We have to restore order. This can't go on. So hopefully, you know the president talking that way (law and order) will put a little spine in some of (the) governors ... .”

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However, others disagreed strongly. Retired U.S. Marine General John Allen said: “It wasn’t enough that peaceful protesters had just been deprived of their first-amendment rights – this photo-op sought to legitimize that abuse with a layer of religion.” And, Retired U.S. Navy Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said: “It sickened me yesterday to see security personnel – including members of the National Guard – forcibly and violently clear a path through Lafayette Square ... . There was little good in the stunt.” Finally, an Atlantic headline made clear the danger: “James Mattis (former Trump Secretary of Defense) Denounces President Trump, Describes Him as a Threat to the Constitution”.

Johnson doesn’t “see” other wrongdoing either. As chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, he has scheduled a hearing on “Evaluating the Federal Government’s Procurement and Distribution Strategies in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic”. Will the hearing examine what the Washington Post reported: “Market for masks is plagued by price gouging and fraud” ? Will the committee look into a report from ProPublica: “The Feds Gave a Former (Trump) White House Official \$3 Million to Supply Masks to Navajo Hospitals. Some May Not Work” ? Finally, will Johnson scrutinize allegations against his former fundraiser Mike Gula, under investigation by Congress, Maryland and the U.S. Justice Department for failing to provide masks and other equipment that had been ordered?

Unlikely. Johnson doesn’t see wrongdoing.

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