

Bill Kaplan: U.S. Senator Johnson undermines checks and balances

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The COVID-19 pandemic has reached horrific milestones. A stunning 1.6 million cases nationally, including over 15,000 in Wisconsin (WI), near 100,000 deaths nationally, over 500 in WI. Moreover, the economy is plunging downward, including historic mortgage arrears, retail sales collapse and a sharp rise in unemployment. The U.S. jobless rate is 14.7 percent, while WI is at 14.1 percent.

However, the unprecedented crisis offers an opportunity for Trump and his acolyte WI GOP Senator Ron Johnson to undermine checks and balances. Johnson, Chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, apparently does not grasp that the Senate and White House are separate institutions. The Senate is supposed to provide oversight over the Trump administration to help expose and root out corruption and misconduct.

After the Watergate scandals, Congress passed the Inspector General (IG) Act of 1978. The legislation established a system of independent nonpartisan IG's, appointed by the president for all cabinet-level departments. The watchdogs were to investigate corruption, misconduct and waste. IG's are not supposed to be fired by the White House without justification. But Trump has decided to do just that, often on a Friday night to avoid the glare of news coverage.

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Trump first removed the intelligence community IG Michael Atkinson for his having taken seriously a whistle-blower report on Trump's infamous phone call with Ukraine's president. Then Trump fired Glenn Fine, selected to be the IG to oversee

the \$trillions of COVID-19 relief that Congress passed. No explanation given. What is the White House hiding or afraid of? Later, Trump removed Health and Human Services IG Christi Grimm, whose report on COVID-19 supply and test shortages upset Trump. Then, Transportation IG Mitch Behm was removed, amid allegations that Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao was favoring grants to Kentucky, represented by her husband, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. One more bombshell dropped.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asked Trump to fire the State Department IG Steve Linick. No explanation. The press exposed that Linick had been investigating Pompeo over multiple allegations: Pompeo had defied a bipartisan Congress's blocking military aid for Saudi Arabia's murderous involvement in Yemen's civil war. Pompeo declared a phony emergency so the U.S. could sell arms to Saudi Arabia. Other allegations involved Pompeo's using staff to run personal errands for himself and his wife. Worse were fancy dinners for GOP donors at the State Department to advance Pompeo's political career.

However, Senator Johnson does not get it. He said: "I'm not crying big crocodile tears over (IG Linick's) termination." But Utah GOP Senator Mitt Romney had it right: "The firing of multiple inspectors general is unprecedentedIt is a threat to accountable democracy and a fissure in the constitutional balance of power". Similarly, Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin told me: "The independence of inspectors general is crucial to rooting out the wrongdoings and failures of this administration, but Trump doesn't want out government to work for the people, he wants it to work for him".

Johnson is abdicating his responsibilities.

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