

Bill Kaplan: Senator Johnson supported government shutdown and default

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So far, man-made disasters have been narrowly avoided as Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson supported a government shutdown. Congress had not passed any appropriations bills (the fiscal year ends September 30). A government shutdown was imminent unless Congress approved a stopgap funding bill to allow more time for compromise and negotiation. A shutdown would result in farmers not getting aid or loans, college students facing financial assistance delays, no food safety inspections, dangerous flying conditions without enough air traffic controllers or plane inspections and much more in the middle of a pandemic.

However, an irresponsible and reckless Johnson, joined by all Wisconsin House Republicans, opposed a stopgap funding measure. Fortunately, 15 Senate Republicans, including Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, and 34 House Republicans, joined all Democrats in passing the measure, funding the government until December 3. Before then Congress will have to pass its appropriations bills or another short-term fix.

An even worse catastrophe was likely in October as Johnson and Wisconsin House Republicans opposed raising the debt ceiling – for the first time forcing the U.S. government into default. Raising the debt ceiling now, required by a 1917 law, would allow for federal borrowing to pay for congressionally-approved spending during the Trump administration. 97 percent of the national debt was “accrued before Biden’s presidency” (Washington Post). Raising the debt ceiling doesn’t authorize new spending, but pays for nearly \$8 trillion added to the debt by Trump.

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“Mark Zandi, chief economist of Moody’s Analytics, found that a prolonged impasse over the debt ceiling would cost the U.S. economy up to 6 million jobs, wipe out as much as \$15 trillion in household wealth, and send the unemployment rate surging to roughly 9 percent ...” (Washington Post). Interest rates would soar and the stock market would collapse – accompanied by insufficient funds to pay Social Security benefits, fund the military, help families, farmers and small business owners.

As disaster loomed, congressional Republicans played political games, Johnson and McConnell led a filibuster against House-approved measures to raise the debt ceiling (Wisconsin representatives split along party lines, Democrats voting yes, Republicans no). Days from default, McConnell and 10 other GOP senators relented and voted to end the filibuster. Only Democratic senators, including Wisconsin Senator Tammy Baldwin, approved a short-term debt ceiling raise (until December 3). Johnson opposed ending the filibuster and short-term fix. The Democratic-led House approved the measure with no GOP support (Wisconsin representatives split along party lines; GOP Representative Tom Tiffany did not vote).

Johnson continued bloviating about Democrats adding to the debt. Notwithstanding the nearly \$8 trillion added by Trump, including the \$2 trillion added by Trump’s tax cuts skewed to corporations and the wealthy. Moreover, Johnson made the tax cuts more tilted to the rich with a 20 percent deduction for pass-through businesses. However, Trump’s IRS commissioner, Charles Rettig, said the U.S. loses \$1 trillion a year because of tax cheats, including gaming pass-through provisions.

Johnson is fixated on helping his wealthy donors and supporters. The heck with the rest of us.

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