

Bill Kaplan: U.S. Sen. Johnson flip-flops on helping veterans

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The Democratic-led Senate has advanced the Inflation Reduction Act, a reconciliation bill that can't be filibustered. Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin said: "As families and businesses face rising costs, this legislation will reduce inflation and lower out-of-pocket costs for energy, prescription drugs and health care." The bill requires corporations to pay their fair share of taxes, invests in clean energy to fight climate change, allows Medicare to negotiate drug prices and renews enhanced tax credits to lower Affordable Care Act private insurance premiums for middle-working class families.

All Senate Republicans, including Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson, were opposed to the earlier announced Democratic agreement on passing the Inflation Reduction Act. So they blocked final passage of a bill to help veterans get health care and disability benefits from exposure to toxic burn pits and Agent Orange (Vietnam War defoliant). 25 GOP senators, including Johnson, who voted for passage in June, flip-flopped to no, "seemingly out of political pique ..." (Washington Post).

The veterans bill (PACT Act) had initially received overwhelming bipartisan support in Congress. All Wisconsin members of Congress, except GOP Representative Tom Tiffany, had voted for it. However, a small change by the House required another Senate vote. That's when most Senate Republicans disingenuously blocked the bill. Reaction from veterans groups was swift and harsh. The conservative American Legion said: "The PACT Act passed the House and Senate in a bipartisan manner, yet this delay continues because of political games." The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) expressed outrage: "These 25 senators who broke their promise to veterans are risking more veterans getting sick and dying every day this is delayed." And, the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America condemned Senate Republicans: "This is unacceptable. Sick veterans are dying We demand that the Senate stays in session and not leave town until the PACT Act passes."

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The GOP public relations debacle soon had Senate Republicans, including Johnson, flip-flopping. The Hill reported: “Republicans look for escape hatch amid controversy on veterans bill.” Reversing themselves, most Senate Republicans, including Johnson, now voted for the exact same bill they had previously blocked. Johnson issued a pathetic self-serving press release: “The Biden administration and Democrats have played politics with this bill” The VFW had the last word: “Today’s passage of the PACT Act is a landmark victory for veterans of all ages, of all conflicts and their families.”

This was not the first time Johnson stuck it to veterans. In 2014, Johnson and two other GOP senators opposed a bipartisan bill to fix scheduling at Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals. Again, another Johnson press release to deflect blame. The VFW responded to Johnson: “There is a cost of going to war and that includes taking care of those who come home wounded, ill and injured, and if these three senators have determined that we can’t afford to properly care for our veterans, then they should seek employment elsewhere!”

Against helping middle-working class families and veterans: Johnson must be defeated in November.

– Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1994 – 2009.