



Friday, August 2, 2013

4:12 PM

Johnson seeks to unify conservatives amid national security, Obamacare issues

-- GOP U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson today lamented the growing division in the Republican Party and called for "unification" among libertarians and more establishment-based members of the GOP.

In an interview with WisPolitics.com before speaking to the National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials, Johnson said, "My goal -- and this has been my goal since first being sworn in -- is to unify Republicans, to unify conservatives."

There have been several high-profile splits among national Republicans in recent weeks, including on national security issues and a call from some GOP lawmakers to oppose legislation to fund the federal government unless it defunds the federal health care law.

Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie have also exchanged barbs on national security. Johnson termed Paul's stance as "more of an isolationist view."

"I happen to think that the U.S. is the world's superpower and that puts more certain obligations on us," Johnson said. "If America doesn't lead, I believe the world becomes a more dangerous place."

Asked to comment on a strategy championed by Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas and others to fight any legislation that would have the effect of funding Obamacare, Johnson noted, "No one wants to

defund Obamacare more than I do," but expressed some reservations on the approach.

"I don't want to limit my options on these things," Johnson said. "I think most Republicans are fully supportive of what Ted Cruz's and Mike Lee's and Rand Paul's and Marco Rubio's aim in this thing is. We're totally supportive of wanting to defund it, but we just have a different opinion in terms of what is the best approach and what pledges we may or may not sign and what we'd actually do."

In response to national reports that CIA agents who were in Benghazi during last fall's attack have been regularly interviewed, including polygraph tests, to see if they've spoken with the media or members of Congress, Johnson declared he is still determined to get to the bottom of Benghazi.

"I'm never going to give up my efforts to find out exactly what happened, before, during and after the attack," he said. "It's been enormously frustrating up to this point that this administration, although they claim to be the most transparent, has not given us access to who the survivors actually were, much less given us access to talk to those folks."

Johnson defended his record of supporting filibuster attempts to block Obama administration nominees, saying "It's really not happening. Every now and again we do that on nominees, but that's pretty rare, what I'd consider a true filibuster, you know, truly obstructing the work of the Senate."

Johnson said the term "filibuster" is misused, when really, he said, Senate Republicans are just trying to deal with what he termed Majority Leader Harry Reid's tendency to use cloture to end debate and call a bill to a vote.

"We don't get to vote on our amendments," Johnson said. "Our rights as a minority are really being trampled on," he said.

-- Johnson spoke to members of the National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials, which met in Milwaukee today as part of the National League of Cities conference.

Several members of the audience asked how Republicans can better address the economy's effect on the black community and how the GOP can counteract the negative image that it is "balancing the budget on the backs of poor people."

Johnson said all Americans should come together to balance the budget and launched into a numbers discussion of percentages, lending rates and government spending over the years and told the group, "You are fortunate you don't have a PowerPoint presentation."

"I am a Republican," Nathaniel B. Thomas said to Johnson, "but I'm not happy with what's happening, the devastation that's taking place in our community. How can we turn that

negativity of the Republican Party into a more positive party that can make a difference?"

Johnson replied that federal government is dysfunctional, too vast and that local officials are at a better level to solve problems.