

WASHINGTON — House Republicans, among them the head of a key oversight panel, threatened Friday to call Cabinet secretaries and other executive agency managers before congressional hearings on how furloughs are applied in the wake of forced spending cuts.

The lawmakers warned President Barack Obama against choosing political gain over public safety in deciding which federal employees are assigned the periods of unpaid leave as a result of \$85 billion in automatic cuts that began Friday.

“If they’re laying off TSA agents and air-traffic controllers, and yet (Transportation Secretary) Ray LaHood’s office is still getting cleaned each night, come on,” said Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, chairman of the regulatory subcommittee of the House Oversight Committee.

“The fundamental mission of the president of the United States is to ensure the security of this nation,” Jordan said. “That’s got to be his top priority.”

Jordan said he and other leaders of oversight panels in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives may hold hearings to ask how the furloughs are applied if the lawmakers believe essential workers are being sent home before more peripheral employees.

Rep. Tom Massie, R-Ky., said the government should freeze unmanned aerial surveillance within U.S. airspace before furloughing air-traffic controllers.

“We should put people in front of drones,” Massie said.

Republicans have accused Obama and Democratic congressional allies of trying to gain political advantage by painting doomsday scenarios about the immediate impact of the forced spending cuts, which the Republicans say amount to only 2.2 percent of this year’s projected \$3.8 trillion federal budget.

But about two-thirds of the total budget is exempt under the 2011 Budget Control Act, which requires \$1.2 trillion in forced cuts over a decade if Congress can't find other reductions. The automatic cuts, called sequestration, were to have started Jan. 1 of this year, but a short-term deal pushed them back to March 1.

The exempted spending – including Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security benefits, and wages for active-duty troops – means that hundreds of discretionary military and non-defense programs will experience an effective hit of 6.6 percent or more.

Obama kept up the pressure Friday, suggesting that the vast majority of federal workers are subject to furloughs regardless of their jobs.

“Hundreds of thousands of Americans who serve their country – Border Patrol agents, FBI agents, civilians who work at the Pentagon – all will suffer significant pay cuts and furloughs,” Obama told reporters at the White House.

Rep. Mick Mulvaney, R-S.C., disputed Obama's claim. He pointed to recent guidance from the Office of Personnel Management, the human resources arm of the executive branch, that he said gives agency directors leeway to decide which employees get furloughed based on the importance of their work.

A 35-page document titled “Guidance for Administrative Furloughs” says in part:

“Agencies are responsible for indentifying the employees affected by administrative furloughs based on budget conditions, funding sources, mission priorities (including the need to perform emergency work involving the safety of human life or protection of property) and other factors.”

A reporter asked Obama on Friday to respond to criticism from New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, an independent who endorsed the president's re-election but who suggested this week that the administration is exaggerating the spending cuts' impact.

“The Border Patrol agents who are out there in the hot sun, doing what Congress said they’re supposed to be doing, finding out suddenly that they’re getting a 10 percent pay cut and having to go home and explain that to their families – I don’t think they feel like this is an exaggerated impact,” Obama said. “So I guess it depends on where you sit.”

From where many Republican lawmakers sit, Obama was hawking unduly bad news to get Americans on his side in the larger budget battles that have stymied Washington.

**“On the non-defense side, the overall spending level this year is 12 percent higher than when Barack Obama came into office four years ago, so even after the cuts, these agencies will be spending more than they did then, even on an inflation-adjusted basis,”**  
said

**Rep. John Campbell, R-Calif.**