

THUNE

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insisted that drone strikes continue, albeit with stronger safeguards and more transparency. "I think there is going to be a pretty robust discussion about it. There already has been, but the president himself, in his speech, has sort of pulled back a little bit, and looked at redefining the parameters for use of drones from now requiring an imminent, continuing threat to the U.S. as opposed to a significant threat," Thune said. "It's a different standard that he is trying to put into place, and Congress, obviously, is very concerned about collateral damage, civilian casualties, and how the program is being used and what it is attempting to accomplish."

The senator said he welcomes increased dialogue and scrutiny of this issue in Congress. "This is an element of our foreign policy, it's an element of our military power, and we need to make sure that we're using those elements of our military power in a way that accomplish objectives that are vital to America's national security interests," he said. "We must also do it in a way that minimizes collateral damage and civilian casualties."

On the domestic front, Thune held little hope for Congress finding a solution to federal fiscal issues, including a way to end the budget sequester, anytime soon.

"If there was something to replace the sequester, to turn it off, if we could figure out how to proportion the reductions of spending elsewhere in the budget, it could happen," he said. "Democrats in the Congress want to see tax increases used to turn off the sequester. It looks to me right now that it (ending the sequester) could be very hard."

The best that Congress may be able to do, he added, is be more flexible when it comes to formulating guidelines for devoting funds to federal programs in the future.

"I guess the best thing I think we can hope for in the short term is that when Congress does appropriation bills this year that they provide the optimum amount of flexibility so that agencies that are dealing with the sequester can move funds around," Thune said. "The sequester, unfortunately, was pretty prescriptive in how it was designed and so I think if we're going to continue to have these cuts in place, let's allow the agencies that have to implement them to do it in a way that's rational and makes sense."

Compromise among political leaders in the nation's capital, the senator noted, continues to be a difficult process.

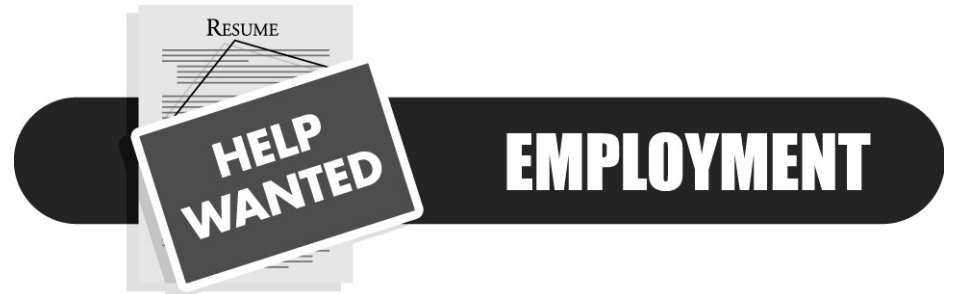
"It's hard. We're in a place right now where there are big differences in opinion about what's the best answer, what's the best solution," he said. "Eventually, I think, forces will work to bring that about, but at least for right now, both sides are sort of dug in."



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