

WASHINGTON -- Nebraska's Sen. Mike Johanns and 19 other Republican senators Wednesday called for a hearing into reports that the Obama administration used the future of Offutt Air Force Base as bargaining chip in the health care debate.

Sen. Ben Nelson, a Democrat, has said the rumors are completely false. The White House has called them "absurd."

A defense analyst said Wednesday that base closures simply don't work that way.

Even Johanns himself said he doesn't believe the rumors. "When Sen. Nelson says it didn't happen, I trust Sen. Nelson. I have no reason not to trust him," Johanns said.

It is true that Nelson is one of the last Democratic holdouts on the health care bill and that he has been in ongoing discussions with the White House. Conservative pundits have cited anonymous sources saying that the White House threatened to close Offutt, home of U.S. Strategic Command, if Nelson did not support the bill.

Johanns said the rumors have reached a level where people in Nebraska are wondering if they're valid.

"It's kind of taken on a life of its own, and I think that is very unfortunate," Johanns said. "So, my hope is that the White House will respond and say, 'This is not how we make these kinds of decisions.'" White House Communications Director Dan Pfeiffer already released a statement Tuesday that said the rumors were "completely baseless and false." Pfeiffer issued a fresh statement Wednesday: "This rumor is absolutely false, as the people spreading it well know. This is nothing but a cynical, crass political game that is designed to maintain the status quo. Let's be clear: the people spreading these falsehoods think nothing is wrong with a system under which families and businesses continue to bear the brunt of skyrocketing costs, insurance companies are allowed to discriminate and drop at will, and thousands of Americans lose their coverage every single day."

But Johanns said the White House needs to work directly with senators.

"The White House can work with us and say 'Look, folks, this did not happen. We're happy to appear before whatever committee,'" Johanns said. "I think that really does put this to rest."

Nelson spokesman Jake Thompson declined to comment on Johanns' call for a hearing on the matter. Earlier Wednesday, Nelson told reporters that the rumors are completely unfounded

and are being spread by people with political agendas.

"Their goal is only to derail the serious debate that we're having on health care reform," Nelson said.

Nelson said that Nebraskans know he cannot be threatened and that if anyone tried to do so, he would go public with it.

Johanns said it's not unusual for politicians to be put in a position where they have to respond to false reports.

Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., said he supports the senators' call for a hearing. "A threat like this would usually sound absurd, except that there has been a culture of strong-arm, Chicago-style politics," he said.

John Pike, director of [GlobalSecurity.org](http://GlobalSecurity.org) and a leading defense analyst, dismissed the idea that any White House would threaten to close a base, for one simple reason -- it's too hard to do and it takes too long.

"It would take all the king's horses and all the king's men to close an Air Force base," Pike said. "While I'm all in favor of a vendetta and vengeance and all that other kind of stuff, I just don't think they could keep up the head of steam for very long."

Too many people would be in a position to halt the closing of the base and, even if it were eventually closed, Nelson could be well out of office by that time, Pike said.

"The notion that they're just going to go out there and turn the lights off -- it doesn't work that way."

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