Rep. James Clyburn (D-S.C.) said Tuesday that a letter from nearly 100 House Republicans urging President Obama not to appoint Susan Rice as secretary of State employed racially charged "code words" to make its case.

The letter, signed by 97 House Republicans, says Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, "is widely viewed as having either willfully or incompetently misled the American public in the Benghazi matter" — language Clyburn saw as racially loaded.

"You know, these are code words," Clyburn, the third-ranking Democrat in the House, told CNN. "We heard them during the campaign — during this recent campaign we heard Sen. Sununu calling our president lazy, incompetent, these kinds of terms that those of us, especially those of us who were grown and raised in the South, we would hear these little words and phrases all of our lives and we’d get insulted by them.

"Susan Rice is as competent as anybody you will find, and just to paste that word on her causes problems with people like [incoming Congressional Black Caucus Chairwoman] Marcia Fudge and certainly causes a big problem with me," he added.

In a press conference earlier this week, Rep. Fudge (D-Ohio) said she believed criticism of Rice contained "a clear … sexism and racism."

"It is a shame that anytime something goes wrong, they pick on women and minorities," Fudge added.

Clyburn described himself as frustrated by the criticism of Rice. While he said it is fair to criticize her for having initially claimed the attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, was the result of a protest against an anti-Islam video, he objected to the language used by Republican leaders.

"I don’t like those words," Clyburn said. "Say she was wrong for doing it, but don’t call her incompetent. That is something totally different. A lot of very competent people sometimes make errors, and to say that she erroneously did it, I don’t have a problem with it."

Clyburn also hit Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) for their statements last week that they would seek to block Rice’s nomination to head the State Department — comments that earned them a sharp rebuke from President Obama.

"To call her incompetent, a Ph.D., Rhodes scholar being called incompetent by someone who can’t hold a candle to her intellectually, by someone who said, and Sen. McCain called her incompetent as well, but he told us that [Sarah] Palin was very competent to be vice president of the United States," Clyburn said.

Clyburn added that he was "frustrated by" the senators’ "unfair" comments and that he "thought that they were aiming their arrows at the wrong person."

"Susan Rice is an outstanding person, and to have her sullied like this really frustrates me to no end," Clyburn said. "And I hate to see representatives from South Carolina, where her roots run deep, out in the forefront of this. It is just unseemly to me."