One Person Can Start a War.
Right Now, That Person is Trump.

How We Drifted from the Founders' Design—and How to Fix It



A decision made in hours. Debated afterward.

Donald Trump didn't create the power to take the United States to war.

But he used it—and in doing so, made something clear:

A single person can effectively initiate military action, while Congress debates it afterward.

That's not how the system was designed.

And it didn't happen overnight.

War was never meant to be decided by one person.

That wasn't an oversight in the Constitution—it was the point.

The Founders understood something fundamental: the executive branch is the most prone to act quickly, decisively, and—at times—impulsively. So they built a system to

slow that down. Congress was given the power to declare war. The president was designated commander-in-chief.

It was a deliberate division of authority. A safeguard.

War, in their view, was too consequential to be decided quickly—or alone.

For much of our early history, that balance held.

The Design: Deliberation Over Impulse

The Constitution is remarkably clear on one point: the power to take the nation to war does not belong to a single individual.

James Madison warned that the executive is the branch most prone to war. For that reason, the decision to engage in conflict was placed in the hands of the legislature—where debate, delay, and accountability would serve as a check against impulsive action.

That structure reflected a hard-earned lesson from history: concentrated power invites overreach. Shared power forces deliberation.

The Drift: From Shared Responsibility to Delegated Authority

The shift away from that design did not happen overnight.

It evolved gradually—through crisis, convenience, and political avoidance.

During the 20th century, particularly after Vietnam, Congress became increasingly reluctant to take direct responsibility for decisions about war. The political risks were high, and the consequences uncertain. Delegating authority to the executive branch became the easier path.

After September 11, 2001, that trend accelerated.

Congress passed broad authorizations for the use of military force—most notably the 2001 AUMF—that granted the president wide latitude to act against loosely defined threats.

What was intended as a targeted response became, over time, a standing permission slip.

Presidents of both parties used that authority to justify military actions across multiple countries and contexts, often far removed from the original intent of Congress.

At the same time, legal interpretations expanded executive power, and Congress—more often than not—chose not to challenge them.

Power was not seized.

It was ceded.

And once established, it became precedent.

The Modern Reality: The One-Person War Power

Today, the United States operates under a very different reality than the one the Founders designed.

The president now possesses the practical ability to initiate military action with limited immediate constraint. Congress is often informed after the fact, rather than consulted in advance.

Legal frameworks, precedent, and political inertia have combined to create what can best be described as a “one-person war power.” While formal checks still exist, they are rarely exercised in a timely or decisive manner.

In practice, the system has shifted from deliberation to reaction.

We no longer consistently decide whether to go to war before action is taken.

More often, we debate it afterward.

Why It Matters

This shift is not merely academic—it carries real consequences.

When decisions of war and peace are concentrated in a single office, the risk of miscalculation increases. The discipline imposed by debate and shared responsibility is diminished.

Conflicts can become open-ended, objectives unclear, and accountability diffuse.

Equally important, the public becomes more detached. When Congress does not take clear positions, citizens are left without a direct line of accountability through their elected representatives.

War becomes procedural rather than deliberate.

That is not what the Founders intended—and it is not a stable foundation for long-term decision-making.

The Path Back: Restoring Balance

Reversing this trend does not require a constitutional amendment. The framework already exists.

What is needed is the will to use it.

First, Congress must replace broad, open-ended authorizations with narrowly defined ones. Any authorization for the use of military force should include specific objectives, geographic limits, and a clear expiration date.

Second, funding must be used as a real enforcement mechanism. Military action that has not been explicitly approved should not be funded beyond a short, defined window.

Third, emergency powers should be limited in duration and scope. If continued action is necessary, Congress should be required to affirm it.

Finally, transparency and accountability must be strengthened. The legal and strategic basis for military action should be clearly communicated to both Congress and the public.

These are not radical changes. They are practical steps to realign the system with its original design.

Conclusion

This is not a question about any single president or political party.

It is a question about the structure of our government.

Over time, we have drifted from a system of shared responsibility to one of concentrated authority. That shift was gradual—but its consequences are significant.

A republic does not lose its balance in a single moment. It loses it incrementally—and restores it only by deliberate choice.

The tools to restore that balance already exist.

The question is whether we are willing to use them.