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Professor Becky Rouse

Module 2: The Security Environment D14

1 July 2025

Session 2.3 DBF

Discussion Topic

CLOs assessed by this DBF:

- 5. Demonstrate the ability to apply critical and creative thinking.
- 6. Demonstrate the ability to communicate clearly and precisely
- 10. Analyze the authorities, responsibilities, and differences between the Executive and Legislative Branches in providing for national defense.

DBF 2.3 covers the topics and concepts covered in sessions 2.11 through 2.13

The DBFs in Module provide students an opportunity to interact and discuss session concepts with the professor and fellow students. The DBFs also allow students an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding and ability to effectively apply session concepts. DBF interaction is a significant part of the Program's requirements and is evaluated by the professor as part of the student's overall contribution grade.

For this DBF, each student's primary DBF post must be between 200-250 words in length and posted via Blackboard no later than 2359 Eastern Time on Tuesday of Week 10. Once a student has posted their primary post in Blackboard, the primary DBF posts of other students will become visible. Secondary DBF posts must be between 150-200 words in length and posted via Blackboard no later than 2359 Eastern Time on Thursday of Week 10.

Further guidance on DBFs can be found in paragraph 8.1 of the NC&S syllabus.

DBF 2.3 Guidance:

The cohort will be divided into two even groups—a **BLUE group** and a **GOLD group**. The BLUE group must answer the BLUE question below as their Primary post and the GOLD group must answer the GOLD question below as their Primary post.

Background:

Sessions 2.11 through 2.13 have provided a foundation for you to better understand the authorities and responsibilities of both the executive and legislative branches, in addition to offering an overview of the national security council and interagency process. These sessions have also illustrated the inherent tension that can, and often does, exist between the executive and legislative branches.

By now you should understand that Article II of the U.S. Constitution provides the primary source of the President’s authority: “The Executive Power shall be vested in a President...,” while Article I, provides the Congress its authority: “All legislative powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress...” The apparent limitation (herein granted) placed on Congress is not similarly placed on the President in Article II. Howell states on page 14 of Presidential Power in the Modern Era (reading 11-3) that “modern presidents often exert power by setting public policy on their own and preventing Congress and the courts – and anyone else for that matter – from doing much about it.” He also asserts on page 13 the extent that presidents use ‘power tools of the presidency’ more now than they did a century ago, and act unilaterally, is what is distinctly modern about the modern presidency.

DBF 2.3 PRIMARY POST QUESTIONS:

BLUE: According to Howell (reading 11-3, p. 14), the ability to act unilaterally is unlike any other power formally granted to the President. In 200-250 words, discuss the two features of a president acting unilaterally that stand out to Howell and assess why (or why not), from your perspective, these are important aspects of presidential power.

GOLD: According to the Serafino and Ekmektsioglou reading, Congress and National Security (reading 13-3), Congress’s role in national security can vary based on the President’s ability to respond quickly to set the national security agenda. In 200-250 words, discuss, from your perspective, where Congress can exercise its power most effectively and why?

DBF 2.3 SECONDARY POST RESPONSE QUESTION:

BLUE and GOLD: Read all primary DBF posts from your classmates in both groups. In 150-200 words each, respond to two (2) separate students' primary posts (from the opposite group) and either reinforce, expand upon, or challenge the student's answer. Students must support (and cite) their responses using additional information from the applicable student preparation materials.

Note: Although each student is required to respond to two (2) primary posts as a minimum, all students are encouraged to respond and offer substantive comments as outlined above to more than two posts, preferably a rebuttal to a student's secondary post. Additional student-to-student interaction that is of high quality will be weighted as additional credit towards the student's contribution grade..

Response

Primary Post (*by July 1, 2025*)

Gold Thomas DBF 2.3

Congress is most effective in national security when it controls the money, shines the light, and stops the clock. In a world where presidents speak with one voice and act with one hand, Congress must leverage its slower pace into strategic depth. It can if it leans hard into the powers it already holds.

Congress's power blooms in sustained operations, not crises. In moments like Iraq 2006 or Afghanistan 2021, when the fires burn long, not hot, oversight hearings shift from spectacle to scalpel. Serafino and Ekmektsioglou (2018) note that while the president often holds advantages in setting the national security agenda, Congress can shape long-term outcomes through its "power of the purse," investigative authority, and legislative tools (pp. 156–157). That is where the legislative branch wins the long game. It controls appropriations, sets reporting requirements, and hauls people to the Hill and grills them.

Oversight does not start with a gavel. It starts with will. Take Guantanamo where Congress did not just oppose closure, but it blocked it using the NDAA to prohibit detainee transfers (Pratt, 2023). This was not nuance, but power.

Budgets are the sword and shield. Congress writes the check, or it does not. That is leverage. As Murphy (2021) warned, "the country makes better national security decisions as a whole when Congress has a seat at the table." That seat is not ceremonial, but constitutional. Through the

purse and the vote, Congress need not match the president's speed. It only needs to shape the terrain.

References

Murphy, C. (2021, July 20). National security is stronger when Congress is involved. Here's how we get back to the table. War on the Rocks. [https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/national-](https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/national-security-is-stronger-when-congress-is-involved-heres-how-we-get-back-to-the-table/)

[security-is-stronger-when-congress-is-involved-heres-how-we-get-back-to-the-table/](https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/national-security-is-stronger-when-congress-is-involved-heres-how-we-get-back-to-the-table/)

Pratt, M. (2023, June 6). Session 2.13 – Congress and national security [Video]. U.S. Naval War College, Naval Command and Staff. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBtAhglokBA>

Serafino, N. M., & Ekmektsioglou, E. G. (2018). Congress and national security. In D. S. Reveron, N. K. Gvosdev, & J. A. Cloud (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of U.S. national security* (pp. 151–182). Oxford University Press.

RESPONSE TOD RESPONSE

Jordan, sharp insight on tempo. You draw a clear contrast between the urgency of OEF and the prolonged, calculated nature of strategic competition with the PRC. But the slowness you highlight? It is not a liability. It can be a tool if Congress chooses to use it. Gray zone threats are not overcome with speed. They emerge slowly, shaped by ambiguity, sustained by persistence, and demanding a kind of strategic patience that resists impulse. And that is where Congress, built for deliberation across sessions rather than seconds, has space to operate effectively.

You are right to flag the roadblocks. Fragmented committees. Limited expertise. Attention that drifts. However, the architecture remains. As Serafino and Ekmektsioglou (2018) point out, long-game influence is where Congress actually has traction (pp. 157–158). It can shape. It can steer. Slowly, yes, but decisively if it stays in the fight.

The question is not just whether Congress will engage. It is whether it will endure. That is what a gray zone strategy tests: not muscle, not speed, but memory.

References

Serafino, N. M., & Ekmektsioglou, E. G. (2018). Congress and national security. In D. S. Reveron, N. K. Gvosdev, & J. A. Cloud (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of U.S. national security* (pp. 151–182). Oxford University Press.

Secondary Post #1 (*by July 3, 2025*)

DBF 2.2 SECONDARY POST RESPONSE

Warren,

Unilateral presidential action may appear democratic in form, but its power lies in something deeper: sequence and solitude. Your post highlights Howell's two features of initiative and independence, but Howell's warning is structural, not merely procedural. Once a president acts, the terrain shifts. "Rather than waiting at the end of an extended legislative process to sign or veto a bill, the president simply sets new policy and leaves it up to Congress and the courts to respond" (Howell, 2003, p. 8). The courts and Congress must catch up, coordinate, and then counter. Rarely do they.

You frame executive orders as expressions of electoral will. That is a compelling point, but elections do not deliver clean mandates. They deliver coalitions, and executive action often bypasses those very coalitions to impose a singular interpretation of victory. Howell stresses that acting alone means acting without contest. No negotiation. No compromise. Just action.

So yes, the president may set the agenda, but that does not mean the agenda reflects a national consensus. It reflects executive discretion, accelerated. Howell does not celebrate this. He calls it modern. In doing so, he invites scrutiny, not applause.

References

Howell, W. G. (2003). Presidential power in the modern era. In *Power without persuasion: The politics of direct presidential action* (pp. 1–23). Princeton University Press.

Secondary Post #2 (*by July 3, 2025*)

DBF 2.2 SECONDARY POST RESPONSE

Jordan, your framing of unilateral action as both constitutional mutation and operational necessity sets up a compelling tension. But Howell's diagnosis runs colder: unilateral power is not just expedient, it is systemic. It is less about momentary crisis and more about institutional architecture. It is about how the president moves first, alone, and leaves others scrambling to react.

The Soleimani strike is a sharp case study, but it is not an outlier. It is a feature. As Howell (2003) observed, "Presidents move policy first and thereby place upon Congress and the courts the burden of revising a new political landscape" (p. 8). That burden is not light, and it rarely shifts back. Once the executive acts, the courts require standing, Congress requires consensus, and neither moves fast.

You rightly raise the risk of overreach. But that risk is not hypothetical. It is baked in. Howell does not warn of occasional lapses. He charts a presidency structurally designed to act without consent. "Power without persuasion" is not a critique of behavior. It is a blueprint for how the modern presidency works.

References

Howell, W. G. (2003). Presidential power in the modern era. In *Power without persuasion: The politics of direct presidential action* (pp. 1–23). Princeton University Press.

Secondary Post #3 (*by July 3, 2025*)

DBF 2.2 SECONDARY POST RESPONSE

Andrew, your distinction between speed and dilution gets to the core of Howell's analysis. Speed creates initiative. Dilution, or rather, the lack of it, preserves the president's agenda in its purest form. Together, they form a presidency that not only acts first but acts alone, without compromise or consensus. That is not just power. That is primacy.

Howell (2003) writes, "the president moves policy first and thereby places upon Congress and the courts the burden of revising a new political landscape" (p. 8). In that single move, unilateral action does more than skip steps; it reshapes both the tempo and terrain of governance. And as you point out, it concentrates power in ways that would have unsettled the framers. Gvosdev, Knott, and Nichols (2016) argue that strategic agility, while operationally advantageous, risks distorting the constitutional architecture meant to divide power, not streamline it.

You are right to call it essential and dangerous. Howell does not ignore the risk. He shows how the system, as it functions now, enables presidents to act with increasing autonomy. It is a structure that rewards speed, not consensus, and Howell invites us to question what that means for balance and representation.

References

Gvosdev, N. K., Knott, S. F., & Nichols, T. (2016). *The president, the presidency and theater security*. Newport, RI: Naval War College. Revised for CDE by C. Faulkner, Spring 2023.

Howell, W. G. (2003). Presidential power in the modern era. In *Power without persuasion: The politics of direct presidential action* (pp. 1–23). Princeton University Press.