

Trump's executive orders are no laughing matter. He'll sometimes bring the tremendous power of the entire executive branch to bear on some petty issue. And usually, at least from my perspective, harming the public interest and sometimes democracy itself. And yet...it's sometimes a little hard to keep from laughing.

Sometimes it's the mismatch between the dignity and sheer power of the office of the presidency and the topic on which that power is deployed, like wheeling up a cannon to shoot a wasp. If we didn't know that Trump was incapable of laughing at himself, you might almost think he was engaged in self-parody. Imagine some later historian flipping through the pages of the *Federal Register* and coming upon Executive Order 14264, "Maintaining Acceptable Water Pressure in Showerhead." Think of it: He went to incredible lengths to attain the ultimate power, and this is what he does with it. Or there's the one where he aims the full might of the U.S. government at the goal of "Ending Procurement and Forced Use of Paper Straws." Who says Americans can't dream big anymore?

There's also the elevated, legalistic tone for these trivial subjects. For instance, there's this: "By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, it is hereby ordered: Within 45 days of the date of this order, the Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, in coordination with relevant agencies, shall issue a National Strategy to End the Use of Paper Straws." Followed, no doubt, by a National Strategy to Eliminate Cheeseburgers with Foreign Cheese.

The constant repetition can also start to seem funny after a time. After reading the "By the authority vested in me..." language about forty or fifty times in a row, it begins to seem like a cartoon my son used to watch, where in every episode, the hero would call out, "By the Power of Gray Skull." I never found out what or who Gray Skull was, or what happened to the rest of the skeleton. And to tell the truth, in many cases I have no idea what specific power Trump is calling upon either.

Some of the boilerplate language can also seem strangely out of place. Trump may be wiping out programs that feed starving babies, attempting to close entire cabinet departments, persecuting dissident law firms, or ordering mass firings across the executive branch, but there's one thing that his Executive Orders hold sacred. No matter what the topic or how pressing an emergency is supposed to be, no executive order shall ever "impair or otherwise affect ... the functions of the Director of the Office of Management and Budget." We're told over and over again, around 150 times in the months since January 20, that not the tiniest smudge can besmirch the white robes of that august official. (You might think that's overkill, but the holder of that office is a Christian Nationalist who probably does think he's the high priest.) It's the gap between the high drama of the order itself and

the persnickety bureaucratese of the proviso that makes it so funny, like someone reminding a hitman that he needs to save receipts for reimbursement.

Sometimes executive orders are funny because they rant about a topic but can't seem to figure out anything to do about it. One thing Trump just hates is that the unitary executive theory doesn't (yet) give him total control of state governments. Some of those governments are run by state officials who, failing to understand their subservient place in the order of the universe, insist on pursuing their own policies. Intolerable! A prime example is Executive Order 14260, "Protecting American Energy from State Overreach." Over half of the Executive Order is an extended rant about how terrible it is that some states want to do something about climate change.

Actually, Trump puts the term climate change in quotes, which apparently is supposed to be enough to make the problem go away, like a child who thinks they're invisible if they cover their eyes. Or maybe I should have started that last sentence, *Actually, "Trump" puts the term climate change in quotes*

Anyway, after running on about all the bad things the states are doing, Trump gets to the nub of the matter: They're opposing *him*: "These State laws and policies are fundamentally irreconcilable with my Administration's objective to unleash American energy. They should not stand."

The reason why, after all this windup, the executive order dribbles away is that Trump apparently has no idea what to do about these misbehaving state governments. Basically, he turns the issue over to his Attorney General in the hope that she will think of something. As it turns out, what she thought of was to bring lawsuits making the same challenges to state programs that other lawsuits were already making. Not surprisingly, the oil industry and their political allies can afford good lawyers, so they don't much need the Justice Department to echo their arguments. But whatever.

I admit that these are all trivial matters, which you may or may not find amusing, given the seriousness of the subject. But sometimes trivia can be very revealing.