



# David Brooks' paean to presidential power is year's worst op-ed

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For four years running, I've closed the holiday season with a column saying “bah, humbug” to [the year's worst op-eds](#). Christmas came early this year, thanks to perennial contender David Brooks. In Thursday's New York Times, Brooks offered a bold panacea for the problems of our time: We need to “[Strengthen the Presidency](#).”

It might strike you as counterintuitive to imagine that a president with a [drone fleet](#), a “kill list,” dragnet [databases of Americans' personal information](#) and increasingly arbitrary authority over [health care](#)'s one-sixth of the U.S. [economy](#) has too little power -- but that's how you know you're in the presence of an original thinker.

We suffer from “reform stagnation,” Brooks laments. It's too hard to push through “[immigration reform](#), [tax reform](#), [entitlement reform](#) and [gun legislation](#)” via the archaic “[Schoolhouse Rock!](#)” method outlined in [Article I](#) of the Constitution.

Luckily, there's “a way out”: “Make the executive branch more powerful.” What that would mean for entitlements and tax reform isn't at all clear, but Brooks follows that prescription with this spit-take-inducing sentence: “This is a good moment to advocate greater executive branch power because we've just seen a monumental example of executive branch incompetence: the botched [Obamacare](#) rollout.”

“It's important to advocate greater executive branch power in a chastened mood,” you see. Brooks teaches a class on “humility” at Yale, so he's an expert on this stuff.

When you make arguments of this caliber, it's clear you've got plenty to be humble about. Brooks' case for ceding yet more power to the executive is a crashing *non sequitur* — irrelevant to the governance problems we have.

Awarding [President Obama](#) “the Worst Year in Washington,” the Washington Post's Chris Cillizza runs through the litany of scandals: [IRS](#) targeting of [Tea Party](#) groups; [Edward Snowden](#)'s exposure of massive [NSA](#) spying; administration dissembling over [Benghazi](#); and the

“complete failure” of the federal health insurance exchange rollout. Which of these, exactly, is a result of too little power in the presidency?

Brooks argues that more executive power means “more discretion [for executive branch officials] to respond to their screw-ups, like the Obamacare implementation.” But, as the Post's [Ezra Klein points out](#), Obama isn't even using the powers he already has to address that failure: “Somewhere in this chain of colossal, consequential screwups, there are surely a few people who deserve to be fired.”

[Congress](#) argues endlessly, Brooks complains, but it's “possible to mobilize the executive branch to come to policy conclusion on something like immigration reform.”

True: As Professor Jonathan Turley recently testified before the House Judiciary Committee, Obama did just that in 2012 with a “transparent effort to rewrite the immigration law after the failure to pass the Dream Act containing some of the same reforms.” Turley warned that similar efforts to reshape the No Child Left Behind Act and issue “royal dispensations” to legislative deadlines in the Affordable Care Act suggest that our system is being “fundamentally transformed into something vastly different from the intentions of the Framers.”

So, Brooks is describing the regime we already have: one in which the president reshapes the law by unilateral diktat. Has that made federal policy any more predictable or rational?

Regardless, more of the same is on the way, judging by former Clinton Chief of Staff [John Podesta's return to the White House](#). As head of the [Center for American Progress](#), Podesta helped write CAP's 2010 monograph “The Power of the President,” urging Obama to “concentrate[e] on executive powers” instead of “the unappetizing process of making legislative sausage.”

“It's a good idea to be tolerant of executive branch power grabs,” Brooks insists. Our tolerance may be sorely tested in the months to come.