

Complicit by Silence

Elias Marrow

I avoid involvement where I can.
But some forms of ignorance make silence a form of complicity.

This is not a statement about temperament. It is not about outrage, nor about the need to comment on everything. Silence is often the correct response. Most issues are noisy, poorly framed, or driven by incentives that make meaningful intervention pointless. Disengagement, in those cases, is not apathy—it is discipline.

But silence is only neutral when ignorance is harmless.

There are moments when silence ceases to be restraint and becomes participation. Not because one agrees with what is happening, but because one understands it well enough to know that remaining quiet stabilizes it.

This is one of those moments.

There is a meaningful difference between ignorance and rhetoric.

Ignorance is a lack of information.
Rhetoric is the strategic misuse of information.

Ignorance can be corrected. Rhetoric is not interested in correction. It exists to produce a feeling, justify an action, or preserve a narrative that would collapse under scrutiny.

When people claim they “just don’t know enough” about an issue that has been exhaustively documented, debated, and litigated for decades, the problem is no longer absence of data. It is selective engagement. It is the choice to absorb slogans instead of facts because slogans are cheaper to hold.

At that point, silence does not preserve neutrality. It protects the louder, simpler story.

Silence is attractive because it minimizes immediate cost.

Speaking introduces friction: social tension, misinterpretation, backlash, and the exhaustion of being pulled into arguments that are rarely conducted in good faith. Silence allows one to preserve relationships, avoid conflict, and maintain the illusion of distance from outcomes one still benefits from.

That is precisely why silence becomes dangerous when power is involved.

I cannot stay silent about Immigration and Customs Enforcement because the issue is no longer one of uncertainty.

The rhetoric surrounding ICE relies on deliberate simplifications: that enforcement is synonymous with safety, that cruelty is incidental rather than instrumental, that harm is exaggerated or isolated. These claims persist not because evidence is unavailable, but because acknowledging the evidence would require confronting uncomfortable conclusions about how power is exercised and who it is exercised upon.

This is not a debate occurring in a vacuum. It is occurring alongside documented practices, legal challenges, internal reports, and human outcomes that are neither abstract nor hypothetical. Pretending otherwise is not ignorance. It is insulation.

Remaining silent in that environment does not make one moderate. It makes one useful.

Silence becomes complicity when four conditions are met:

- You understand what is happening.
- You recognize the harm being done.
- You possess the capacity to speak without catastrophic risk.
- You choose not to, because silence is more comfortable.

This is not about perfection or constant engagement. It is about thresholds.

Not every wrong demands your voice. But some wrongs are sustained precisely because enough people who know better decide that speaking is not worth the cost.

At that point, silence stops being absence. It becomes alignment with the status quo—not through belief, but through inaction.

- This is not a call for constant outrage.
- It is not a demand that everyone become an activist.
- It is not a claim to moral purity.

It is an acknowledgment of a limit.

A point at which disengagement ceases to be a personal choice and becomes a structural contribution to harm.

A common defense of silence is futility: “Nothing I say will change anything.”

That argument misunderstands the function of speech in these moments.

Speaking is not always about winning. It is about refusing to let a false consensus form unchallenged. It is about breaking the illusion that rhetoric is uncontested or universally accepted.

Silence, by contrast, allows narratives to harden unopposed. Over time, what began as rhetoric becomes “common sense,” not because it was true, but because it was never meaningfully resisted.

Speaking carries cost. That cost is real. Relationships strain. Conversations collapse into noise.

But those costs are personal. The cost of silence is distributed outward—to people with less power, fewer options, and no ability to disengage from the outcomes being discussed as abstractions.

Choosing silence in that context is not neutrality. It is a decision about who absorbs the consequences.

I avoid involvement where I can.

But some forms of ignorance make silence a form of complicity.

There are many things worth ignoring.

This is not one of them.