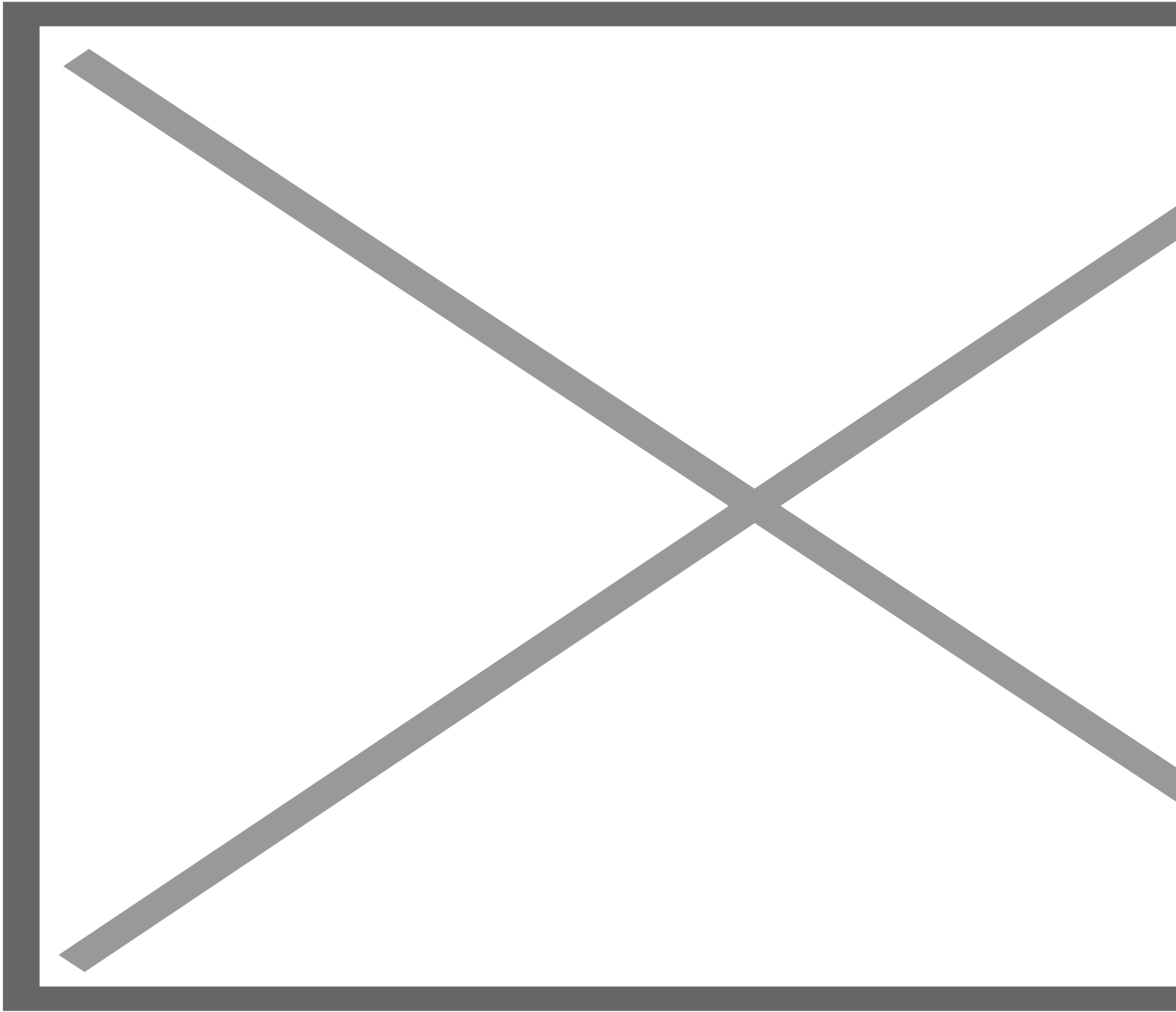


Facing fascism

As lawless gangs of ICE agents terrorize city neighborhoods, it's getting harder to maintain that the United States is a democracy.

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Residents and protesters clash with federal agents in a Chicago residential neighborhood on October 14, 2025. (Photo by Joshua Lott / *The Washington Post* via Getty Images)

This spring, we editorialized against the US government's attempts to deport Mahmoud Khalil, a legal resident targeted for his political speech ("[A disappeared activist](#)," May). Khalil's case is ongoing. Yet mere months later, parts of that editorial—"Democracies don't disappear people for thought crimes," we wrote, "not even when they say them out loud"—sound almost quaint.

This fall, federal agents descended on American neighborhoods armed with zip ties, riot control weapons, and blatant racial profiling. Presumably they work for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, though their plain clothes and masked faces can make it hard to be sure. Without warrants or probable cause, they have been conducting raids and mass arrests of people of all immigration statuses, including US citizens; when they encounter peaceful protests, they routinely respond with wildly disproportionate force (see "[DHS is lying about us](#)"). And they're openly targeting people who are not White.

Like Khalil's detention, this is anti-democratic. It's also a dramatic escalation—enough so that it's increasingly difficult to maintain that the United States is even a democracy anymore. We have entered an era of what political scientists call a hybrid regime: part democracy, part autocracy.

The crisis isn't coming; it's here. Yet it remains easy to become paralyzed in inaction. Autocrats count on this.

But some Americans know exactly what time it is, because it's their families, neighbors, parishioners, and communities under threat—ICE has brought the problem to them. And they're responding: by organizing mutual aid networks and the like but also by putting their bodies on the line—getting beat up, tear gassed, and shot with nonlethal weapons—to prevent people from being taken.

When the rest of us encounter ICE, we can take guidance from their courageous witness. If you see agents confront someone, and if you yourself feel comparatively safe, then go toward the trouble—don't walk away. Get in the way of oppressive power. Throw sand in the gears. Publicly shame those tasked with brutalizing people—it turns out ICE will sometimes stand down when confronted by a crowd willing to make some noise (and record some video).

Policy advocacy still matters, too. Our federal government may have gone rogue, but states and localities have power, too. Chicago's mayor is one of several who have signed orders prohibiting ICE from using city property. Now immigrant advocates are pushing the state of Illinois to take similar steps, keeping ICE out of courthouses, hospitals, and schools.

This fall, the Trump administration adopted a new talking point: the people protesting ICE are members of antifa. Because antifa is an amorphous, leaderless movement against fascism, such accusations are impossible to prove—or disprove, which is of course why they make them. And as such a movement, antifa is a big ideological tent: it covers both political radicals and people with more mainstream politics, both nonviolent activists and some who maintain that there is a time and place for the limited use of violence.

We believe that nonviolent action is the only moral option (see "[A time for nonviolence](#)," November). But all who seek to protect their neighbors from Trump's jackboot thugs should wear his antifa smear as a badge of honor. Because fascism is indeed what we face, and resisting it is the urgent challenge of this moment.