

Trump is right, but ICE wearing masks is wrong

Law enforcement in hiding erodes legitimacy, weakens president's wise immigration policy



Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents escorted a detained immigrant into an elevator after a court hearing last June in New York. (File Photo/The Associated Press)

By **GORDON SONDLAND**

I support President Donald Trump's immigration policy. A nation that cannot control its borders cannot sustain democratic self-government, and laws passed by Congress, however flawed, must be enforced if the rule of law is to mean anything.

I also support legal immigration, assimilation and the idea that becoming American is a commitment to shared civic norms, not merely a legal status.

That is why Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers should not be wearing masks.

Masked enforcement — agents conducting arrests with covered faces, no visible names and sometimes no clearly displayed badge numbers — is a mistake. It is not only unnecessary but also counterproductive. The problem is not the objective of enforcement, but the method used to carry it out.

This distinction matters. Strong borders and swift deportation of those who violated immigration laws were once bipartisan positions. Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton all spoke clearly, on the record, about the need for border security and removal of those here unlawfully. The objectives that

animate today's enforcement agenda are not radical. They remain broadly popular.

What has changed is not public support for enforcement but public discomfort with how it is presented.

My parents came to the United States as Holocaust survivors. They immigrated legally, learned English, worked, assimilated and became proud American citizens. Though German by birth, they embraced American civic culture fully and without reservation. They believed citizenship was a privilege earned through commitment and contribution.

That belief remains central to the American immigration system, and to President Trump's agenda. Contrary to caricature, he welcomes immigrants of all races and backgrounds who want to contribute to the country and abide by its laws. What he rejects is selective enforcement, chaos at the border and the idea that lawbreaking should be rewarded retroactively.

Yet the current optics of enforcement undermine that clarity.

In the United States, law enforcement operates openly. Officers wear badges. Federal agents identify themselves. Authority is not hidden. When the state exercises coercive power, it does so visibly and with accountability. This is not a concession to critics; it is a core feature of legitimate governance.

Masks erode that legitimacy. They transform lawful enforcement into something that appears secretive and militarized. They invite comparisons the administration does not want and does not deserve. Most importantly, they make it easier for opponents to mischaracterize enforcement as authoritarian rather than lawful.

The irony is that this visual strategy weakens public support for policies most Americans already agree with. A large majority supports border control, legal immigration and deportation of those who violate the law. What gives them pause is not enforcement itself, but imagery that feels anonymous and unaccountable.

If officer safety is the concern, the solution is professionalism, not concealment. ICE agents should display their names or badge numbers clearly. All operations should include body cameras with audio, activated as a matter of policy. Local police departments operate under these standards every day. Federal immigration enforcement should do no less.

Transparency protects everyone: the public, the officers and the institution. Accountability strengthens authority; it does not weaken it.

President Trump's critics have succeeded politically not because Americans oppose enforcement, but because the methods make enforcement harder to defend. That is a self-inflicted wound.

Is Donald Trump tactful? No. But on immigration, he is right. And being right carries a responsibility to enforce the law in a manner that reinforces public trust.

A confident nation does not hide its face when it enforces its laws. It does so openly, and stands behind what it does.

Gordon Sondland served as United States ambassador to the European Union from 2018 to 2020.