

Silence in the Face of Abuse

By Don Sutherland

A quote often attributed to Edmund Burke reads, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” At these momentous times—a raging pandemic, a severe recession, and protests in pursuit of racial equality and justice—silence is a particularly perilous choice.

During his tenure in the Senate, Marco Rubio has often insisted that others speak out when they see injustices. After all, human rights are fundamental to human dignity. Without respect for human dignity, individual freedom is not feasible. Three examples from his Twitter account:

May 11, 2018: “Among the many grave human rights violations being committed by #China perhaps the most disturbing & outrageous is the mass incarceration of the #Uyghur people. Sadly too many nations do not speak out for fear of losing Chinese money & investment projects”

September 25, 2018: “Those being sanctioned because of Maduro should know that a path exists for some of you (but not all of you) to getting them lifted. Take meaningful action to restore democracy, refuse to violate human rights & speak out against the regimes abuses”

October 7, 2019: “As #China strong arms the @NBA into silence still waiting for @Nike & their stable of ‘woke’ social justice warrior athletes to speak out.”

In the midst of civil rights protests seeking an end to race-based abuses by police departments across the nation, President Donald Trump tweeted a conspiracy theory concerning an elderly man who suffered a serious head injury at the hands of Buffalo’s police. No provocation was involved when the officers shoved him, sending him tumbling backward with his head smashing into the rock-hard concrete. Video of this horrific abuse was widely available.

Despite the video footage, Trump posted a fictional narrative aimed at delegitimizing the civil rights demonstrations and discrediting those involved on June 9. He tweeted, “Buffalo protester shoved by Police could be an ANTIFA provocateur. 75 year old Martin Gugino was pushed away after appearing to scan police communications in order to black out the equipment. @OANN I watched, he fell harder than was pushed. Was aiming scanner. Could be a set up?”

If Senator Rubio’s many calls for others to speak out against abuses and injustice were principled, one would expect that he would push back forcefully against Trump’s baseless conspiracy theory. He would understand that silence only gives cover to those who carry out such abuses. The end result would be even more abuses. Put simply, he would heed the advice he had long dispensed over and over again on Twitter: “Speak out.”

Instead, he offered the kind of silent indifference that enables human rights abusers. When asked about Trump's tweet, Rubio pleaded, "I didn't see it, you're telling me about it. I don't read Twitter, I only write on it." Later, he added, "I have no information about that man or who he is."

Oh, and what about his claim that he doesn't "read Twitter" and only writes on it? Well, he retweeted Donald Trump on June 5—the very same Donald Trump who concocted an alternative account of what actually took place in Buffalo. He retweeted Senator Tim Scott on June 7. One cannot retweet without reading Twitter. One cannot retweet Donald Trump without reading Donald Trump's Twitter feed.

Even worse, Rubio was not alone among his fellow Republican Senators in pursuing silence. Senator John Cornyn claimed, "You know a lot of this stuff just goes over my head." Senator Lamar Alexander stated, "I'm not going to give a running commentary on the President's tweets."

That these Senators, one of whom has made it a career to publicly champion human rights, could turn a blind eye to a horrific and inexcusable abuse that occurred on American soil is both remarkable and discouraging. Silence paves the way for injustice. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn warned:

In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousand fold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers, we are not simply protecting their trivial old age, we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations.

Silence gives license to illiberal rulers. In *Vichy France*, Robert Paxton observed, "It is hard to measure support for an authoritarian regime... Rulers equate silence with support, acquiescence with enthusiasm and participating with loyalty."

Once the foundations of justice crumble, the risk of authoritarian rule increases. Silence in the face of abuse is the spark that begins the demolition of justice. In turn, the demolition of justice lays a foundation for illiberal or authoritarian rule.

Today, right-wing populism poses a growing risk to the United States' republican framework. That risk is not insignificant. That illiberal movement's adherents are the principal barriers to meaningful civil rights reform. They seek to divert the nation from its quest for a "more perfect union" that was articulated in the Constitution's preamble. They divide people. They incite violence. They denigrate the free press and peaceful assembly.

Good people cannot remain silent at this moment in history. Too much is at stake.