

“This Is What Our Ruling Class Has Decided Will Be Normal”

On Aaron Bushnell’s Action in Solidarity with Gaza

CrimethInc.

February 25th, 2024

On Sunday, February 25, we received an email from a person who signed himself¹ Aaron Bushnell.

It read,

Today, I am planning to engage in an extreme act of protest against the genocide of the Palestinian people. The below links should take you to a livestream and recorded footage of the event, which will be highly disturbing. I ask that you make sure that the footage is preserved and reported on.

We consulted the Twitch account. The username displayed was “LillyAnarKitty,” and the user icon was a circle A, the universal signifier for anarchism—the movement against all forms of domination and oppression.

In the video, Aaron begins by introducing himself. “My name is Aaron Bushnell. I am an active-duty member of the US Air Force and I will no longer be complicit in genocide. I’m about to engage in an extreme act of protest—but compared to what people have been experiencing in Palestine at the hands of their colonizers, it’s not extreme at all. This is what our ruling class has decided will be normal.”

The video shows Aaron continuing to film as he walks to the gate of the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC, puts down the phone, douses himself in a flammable liquid, and sets himself alight, shouting “Free Palestine” several times. After he collapses, police officers who had been watching the situation unfold run into the frame—one with a fire extinguisher, another with a gun. The officer continues pointing the gun at Aaron for over thirty seconds as Aaron lies on the ground, burning.

Afterwards, police announced that they had called in their Explosive Ordinance Disposal Unit.

We have since confirmed the identity of Aaron Bushnell. He served in the United States Air Force for almost four years. One of his loved ones described Aaron to us as “a force of joy in our community.” An online post described him as “an amazingly gentle, kind, compassionate person

¹ In the email, Aaron specified his pronouns as he/him.

who spends every minute and penny he has helping others. He is silly, makes anyone laugh, and wouldn't hurt a fly. He is a principled anarchist who lives out his values in everything he does.”

Aaron's friends tell us that he has passed away as a consequence of his injuries.

All afternoon, while other journalists were breaking the news, we discussed how we should speak about this. Some subjects are too complex to address in a hasty social media post.

The scale of the tragedy that is taking place in Gaza is heartrending. It exceeds anything we can understand from the vantage point of the United States. Over 30,000 Palestinians have been killed, including over 12,000 children. More than half of all inhabitable buildings in all of Gaza have been destroyed, along with the majority of hospitals. The vast majority of the population are living as refugees with little access to water, food, or shelter.

The Israeli military is now planning a ground invasion of Rafah that will add untold numbers of casualties to this toll. It is not hyperbole to say that we are witnessing the deliberate commission of genocide. All available evidence indicates that the Israeli military will continue killing Palestinians by the thousand until they are forced to stop. And the longer this bloodshed goes on, the more people will die in the future, as other governments and groups imitate the precedent set by the Israeli government.

The United States government bears equal responsibility in this tragedy, having armed and financed Israel and provided it with impunity in the sphere of international relations. Within Israel, the authorities have effectively suppressed protest movements in solidarity with Gaza. If protests are going to exert leverage towards stopping the genocide, it is up to people in the United States to figure out how to accomplish that.

But what will it take? Thousands across the country have engaged in brave acts of protest without yet succeeding in putting a halt to Israel's assault.

Aaron Bushnell was one of those who empathized with the Palestinians suffering and dying in Gaza, one of those haunted by the question of what our responsibilities are when we are confronted with such a tragedy. In this regard, he was exemplary. We honor his desire not to stand by passively in the face of atrocity.

The death of a person in the United States should not be considered any more tragic—or more newsworthy—than the death of a single Palestinian. Still, there is more to say about his decision.

Aaron was the second person to self-immolate at an Israeli diplomatic institution in the United States. Another demonstrator did the same thing at the Israeli consulate in Atlanta on December 1, 2023. It is not easy for us to know how to speak about their deaths.

Some journalists see themselves as engaged in the neutral activity of spreading information as an end in itself—as if the process of selecting what to spread and how to frame it could ever be neutral. For our part, when we speak, we presume that we are speaking to people of action, people like ourselves who are aware of their agency and are in the process of deciding what to do, people who may be wrestling with heartache and despair.

Human beings influence each other both through rational argument and through the infectiousness of action. As Peter Kropotkin put it, “Courage, devotion, the spirit of sacrifice are as contagious as cowardice, submission, and panic.”

Just as we have a responsibility not to show cowardice, we also have a responsibility not to promote sacrifice casually. We must not speak carelessly about taking risks, even risks that we have taken ourselves. It is one thing to expose oneself to risk; it is another thing to invite others to run risks, not knowing what the consequences might be for them.

And here, we are not speaking about a risk, but about the worst of all certainties.

Let’s not glamorize the decision to end one’s life, nor celebrate anything with such permanent repercussions. Rather than exalting Aaron as a martyr and encouraging others to emulate him, we honor his memory, but we exhort you to take a different path.

“This is what our ruling class has decided will be normal.”

These words of Aaron’s haunt us.

He is right. We are rapidly entering an era in which human life is treated as worthless. This is obvious in Gaza, but we can see it elsewhere around the world, as well. With wars proliferating around the Mideast and North Africa, we are poised on the threshold of a new age of genocides. Even inside the United States, mass casualty incidents have become routine, while an entire segment of the underclass is consigned to addiction, homelessness, and death.

As a tactic, self-immolation expresses a logic similar to the premise of the hunger strike. The protester treats himself or herself as a hostage, attempting to use his or her willingness to die to pressure the authorities. This strategy presumes that the authorities are concerned with the protester’s well-being in the first place. Today, however, as we wrote in regards to the hunger strike of Alfredo Cospito,

No one should have any illusions about how governments view the sanctity of life in the age of COVID-19, when the United States government can countenance the deaths of a million people without blushing while the Russian government explicitly employs convicts as cannon fodder. The newly-elected fascist politicians who govern Italy have no scruples about consigning whole populations to death, let alone permitting a single anarchist to die.

In this case, Aaron was not an imprisoned anarchist, but an active-duty member of the US military. His LinkedIn profile specifies that he graduated from basic training “top of flight and top of class.” Will this make any difference to the US government?

If nothing else, Aaron’s action shows that genocide cannot take place overseas without collateral damage on this side of the ocean. Unfortunately, the authorities have never been especially moved by the deaths of US military personnel. Countless US veterans have struggled with addiction and homelessness since returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Veterans commit suicide at a much higher rate than all other adults. The US military continues to use weapons that expose US troops to permanent brain injuries.

Members of the military are taught to understand their willingness to die as the chief resource they have to put at the service of the things they believe in. In many cases, this way of thinking is passed down intergenerationally. At the same time, the ruling class takes the deaths of soldiers in stride. *This is what they have decided will be normal.*

It is not willingness to die that will sway our rulers. They really fear our lives, not our deaths—they fear our willingness to act collectively according to a different logic, actively interrupting their order.

Many things that are worth doing entail risks, but choosing to intentionally end your life means foreclosing years or decades of possibility, denying the rest of us a future with you. If such a decision is ever appropriate, it is only when every other possible course of action has been exhausted.

Uncertainty is one of the most difficult things for human beings to bear. There is a tendency to seek to resolve it as quickly as possible, even by imposing the worst-case scenario in advance—even if that means choosing death. There is a sort of relief in knowing how things will turn out. Too often, despair and self-sacrifice mingle and blur together, offering an all-too-simple escape from tragedies that appear unsolvable.

If your heart is broken by the horrors in Gaza and you are prepared to bear significant consequences to try to stop them, we urge you to do everything in your power to find comrades and make plans collectively. Lay the foundations for a full life of resistance to colonialism and all forms of oppression. Prepare to take risks as your conscience demands, but don't hurry towards self-destruction. We desperately need you alive, at our side, for all that is to come.

As we wrote in 2011 in reference to the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi,

Nothing is more terrifying than departing from what we know. It may take more courage to do this without killing oneself than it does to light oneself on fire. Such courage is easier to find in company; there is so much we can do together that we cannot do as individuals. If he had been able to participate in a powerful social movement, perhaps Bouazizi would never have committed suicide; but paradoxically, for such a thing to be possible, each of us has to take a step analogous to the one he took into the void.

Let's admit that the kind of protest activity that has taken place thus far in the United States has not served to compel the US government to compel a halt to the genocide in Gaza. It is an open question what could accomplish that. Aaron's action challenges us to answer this question—and to answer it differently than he did.

We mourn his passing.

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