

Clarity Contra Complicity

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One year ago today, Aaron Bushnell, a member of the American Air Force, self-immolated in response to American complicity in Israeli colonialism. This article serves both as an overview of some particular responses to that action at the time and as a critique of one response specifically.

On February 25, 2024, the military-focused news websites, Stars and Stripes and Task & Purpose, in addition to various mainstream news sites, reported that 25-year-old Aaron Bushnell, a “Senior Airman”, had self-immolated outside the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC.

The army-minded media outlets relayed statements from Air Force officials, who confirmed that Bushnell was in fact an active duty airman and that he had died due to his action.

Task & Purpose offered further detail on Bushnell’s specific role in the Air Force, explaining that he had been “a cyber defense operations specialist assigned to the 531st Intelligence Support Squadron at Joint Base San Antonio Lackland, Texas, according to the Air Force.”

Both outlets included still images of Bushnell in uniform moments before his self-immolation and quoted part of the statement that he made during his action, where he said that he would “no longer be complicit in genocide.” These images and words were captured by the outlets from video recorded and released by Bushnell himself.

Neither outlet directly quoted in full Bushnell’s first two sentences, where he stated his name and then added, “I am an active-duty member of the US Air Force and I will no longer be complicit in genocide.” Instead, the outlets rephrased and relayed this information themselves.

However, the next morning Task & Purpose published another article where they did quote the rest of Bushnell’s statement, in which he had said, “I’m about to engage in an extreme act of protest, but when 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,” Bushnell continued.

“Free Palestine,” screamed Bushnell several times, as the outlet also noted.

National Public Radio that same day reported that Bushnell had “made a will, and he specified that his savings should be donated to the Palestine Children’s Relief Fund and everything down to arranging that a neighbor would take care of his cat.”

Also on February 26th, the organization About Face: Veterans Against the War posted a thread on the Twitter social media site, where they offered “suggestions for talking about Aaron’s action.”

They recommended centring the “cause he sacrificed his life for — uplifting the catastrophic violence Palestinians are suffering at the hands of our government and a call to action to do what we can to stop it.”

“Respect Aaron’s agency”, About Face wrote, “it’s ok to express our grief about the loss many of us feel, and important to be principled in not projecting our own wishes or judgements about his choice.”

“Don’t assume things we don’t know about Aaron’s state of mind, reasons, etc”, they suggested, “his words are strong and clear, we can stick to echoing what he said about his own reasoning and choice.”

“Do not frame this as a mental health issue,” About Face added.

Contextualize the tactic, they advised, but “be careful to not advocate (intentionally or unintentionally) for people to self-immolate.”

“Be careful to neither glorify this protest tactic above others, nor judge or denounce it”, About Face suggested, providing links for veterans and military members to the organization’s resources as well as the GI Rights Hotline.

In their thread, About Face also posted Bushnell's full statement in a graphic including flowers (possibly poppies, anemones or wild roses; poppies being a recognized symbol of military remembrance developed by American academic Moina Michael, based on a pro-war/pro-militarist poem, 'In Flanders Fields', by Canadian military officer John McCrae.)

American army veteran, Ann Wright, released an article on February 26th as well, echoing an earlier one she'd written in 2018 on the historical context of self-immolation as an anti-war tactic, and stating that Bushnell's "sentiments are echoed by hundreds of millions around the world who recognize the horrific Israeli genocide of Gaza."

A couple of days later, on February 28th, the military and security media outlet Defence One, reported that US Air Force General David Allvin had been heckled at a speaking event, where seven protesters shouted slogans such as "ceasefire now", "you killed Aaron Bushnell", and "say his name."

That same day, an American veteran of the US war on Afghanistan, Lyle Jeremy Rubin, wrote in The Nation that "when someone [Bushnell] commits an act like this, and leaves us with words like that, I feel obligated to take the person at their word."

"And the words couldn't be more instructive," added Rubin.

Also on February 28th, Democracy Now interviewed Bushnell's friend and conscientious objector Levi Pierpont, who said that Bushnell "didn't have thoughts of suicide."

"He had thoughts of justice," clarified Pierpont, "that's what this was about."

"It wasn't about his life," Pierpont further explained, "it was about using his life to send a message."

In the same segment, Ann Wright, referred to Bushnell's action as "an act of courage, an act of bravery, to call attention to U.S. policies."

The following day, the journal n+1 published an article by Erik Baker on the context of Bushnell's action, the use of fire in warfare and the history of anti-war self-immolation.

As Baker explained, "the purpose of lighting yourself on fire is not to encourage other people to light themselves on fire."

"It is," Baker affirmed, "to scream to the world that you could find no alternative, and in that respect it is a challenge to the rest of us to prove with our own freedom that there are other ways to meaningfully resist a society whose cruelty has become intolerable."

On March 1st, the website Military.com reported on a vigil that had taken place on February 28th in Portland, Oregon, where members of the organization About Face burned their uniforms as they stood behind a banner reading, "Veterans Say: Free Palestine! Remember Aaron Bushnell"

A little more than a week later, on March 10th, the news outlet The Guardian reported that the Palestinian city of Jericho in the West Bank had named a street after Bushnell.

"He was a soldier who with his last breath, despite the pain, shouted 'Free Palestine,'" explained Amani Rayan, a Jericho city council member who grew up in Gaza and moved to the occupied West Bank at age 19 to study.

"This means he was clear to the depths of his being about why he was doing it," Rayan added.

On March 14th, Haifa-born Jewish scholar Ilan Pappé in The Palestine Chronicle wrote, "It was no accident that Aaron Bushnell donned his military uniform and broadcast live his heroic act of sacrifice over the internet."

A month later, in the online version of the Spring 2024 issue of Bookforum, Hannah Zeavin wrote an article on Bushnell's action and the tendency of some to collapse together suicide and self-immolation.

Zeavin noted that “psychologists and commentators rerouted Bushnell’s message (freedom) to deprive it of one.”

Circling the A

The prominent American anarchist media collective, CrimethInc, reported on Bushnell’s action on February 26th, explaining that they had discussed “all afternoon” how they should speak on it, and that they had received an email from Bushnell himself, in which he told them he would record and livestream footage of the event and asked them to “make sure that the footage is preserved and reported on.”

Rather than first republishing Bushnell’s own statement at the beginning of their article, or acknowledging that he first of all describes himself in his statement as “an active-duty member of the United States Air Force” who would “no longer be complicit in genocide,” CrimethInc first say that upon consulting Bushnell’s Twitch account they were able to determine that he self-identified as an anarchist, due to his username, ‘LillyAnarKitty’ and his user icon of a circle A, which, in the collective’s description, is “the universal signifier for anarchism—the movement against all forms of domination and oppression.”

CrimethInc’s approach draws an obvious contrast to the aforementioned military and civilian media outlets and individual writers who first focused on Bushnell’s role in the military rather than his anarchist identity, if they mentioned the latter at all, especially given that Bushnell himself did not mention his anarchist identity in his statement but did bring to the forefront his military identity.

CrimethInc in their article then proceed to quote Bushnell’s full action statement and describe what is shown in his video, including the fact that a police officer continued to point a gun at Bushnell as he burned, something that had also been reported by Task & Purpose.

CrimethInc go on to say that they had confirmed the identity of Bushnell and the fact that he “served in the United States Air Force for almost four years,” mentioning later in their article that he was “an active-duty member of the US military,” and asking, “Will this make any difference to the US government?”, a question framed to imply that Bushnell’s primary target audience was the US government rather than, say, the oppressed peoples of the world and his fellow members of the military who are complicit in committing militarist and imperialist oppression worldwide.

Bushnell did not explicitly say in his statement who his target audience was. He simply stated that he would no longer be complicit and that “this is what our ruling class has decided will be normal.”

CrimethInc’s implication appears as an unwarranted projection on their part, and a further example of deflection away from Bushnell’s own agency and intent.

Bushnell himself was crystal clear about his action and how it related to his identity as a member of the Armed Forces, as many other people recognized and reaffirmed. But CrimethInc apparently have higher priorities than listening to and respecting the voices of others, even when asked to do so by that person themselves, even when that person has already put their life on the frontline, not just put their reputation online as CrimethInc has.

Act of Refusal

A subsequent anonymous article in response to CrimethInc critiqued them for failing to note the specific dynamic of “the self-sacrifice of a white person in the US military [...] in solidarity with colonized people,” a factor which the anonymous author describes as “without question, important to Aaron’s action.”

But one needn’t have read this critique to see that CrimethInc’s article doesn’t attempt an analysis of the significance of Bushnell’s role in the Armed Forces, or of his act of refusal as a member of the military, other than to criticize the “logic” that they themselves project onto his tactic, to associate his action with the prevalence of suicide among military members, and to say that soldiers are taught that their willingness to die in service is their “chief resource”.

CrimethInc chose to emphasize their own sense of the importance of anarchism, their own analysis of the latest Israeli assault on Gaza, and Bushnell’s personal empathy with the suffering of Gazans, over and above Bushnell’s own words and action.

The collective writes, “We honor his desire not to stand by passively in the face of atrocity.”

But as Bushnell himself stated, at the time of his action he was an active duty airman refusing further complicity, not a civilian, or a mere passive bystander, or just a witness to a massacre. He had not been passive in the first place, so he was not breaking from his passivity, he was breaking from his complicity, as he himself told us.

CrimethInc, in this moment of their article, eschew Bushnell’s specific identity and role as a member of the Armed Forces, blending him in with the larger crowd of empathetic civilians, the thousands across the country who “have engaged in brave acts of protest without yet succeeding in putting a halt to Israel’s assault,” as the collective puts it.

CrimethInc writes that Bushnell was “one of those haunted by the question of what our responsibilities are when we are confronted with such a tragedy,” and the collective adds, “In this regard, he was exemplary.”

Yet, active duty members of the military do not have the exact same responsibilities or level of complicity as civilians under such circumstances, or under any circumstances for that matter. This distinction is part of the difference in their identities or roles. Bushnell was not exemplary simply because of his commitment to a certain level of action. His specific role within the military also played a part in his action and its social effect, as exemplified by the attention paid to it by military media outlets, veterans and conscientious objectors, as well as by civilian writers.

Technically speaking, it is not even possible for a civilian to take the same kind of action Bushnell did. There have been civilian self-immolations against American aggression, but it is not possible for a non-member of the military to take an action that specifically serves as a refusal of their own complicity in the army. Civilians can’t be “exemplary” in the exact way Bushnell was, because they are not in the Armed Forces.

Humility and Responsibility

CrimethInc not only subsume Bushnell within the mass of civilians taking action against the assault on Gaza but also within a wider collectivity that CrimethInc include themselves within by their use of the phrase “our responsibilities”, an abstraction that eclipses the fact that most, if not presumably all of CrimethInc’s members are civilians rather than members of the military.

Bushnell and CrimethInc's responsibilities were not the same. CrimethInc did not even assume the responsibility of accurately relaying Bushnell's action and intent in relation to his military identity, let alone take on the responsibility of being actual members of the military who refuse to serve.

In Palestine and Yemen, resistance fighters honoured Bushnell's action, but have never done so for CrimethInc's texts, precisely because staying alive and scribbling, in itself, are not enough to warrant it. The civilian who stays breathing so as to stay blogging is in no way equivalent to the soldier who takes decisive action against their own complicity, whether they die or not. However, there are of course other things that civilians can do against militarism and colonialism.

CrimethInc, for their part, have not even taken on the strength of their own convictions when it comes to the wilful and propagandistic participation of some of their own comrades in the Ukrainian military and its right-wing units, the Ukrainian state's conscription of civilians into that army, and the critical support for that conscription given by their state soldier comrade Dmitry Petrov to a German media outlet.

The collective is "internally divided over the issue of anarchists participating in military resistance to the Russian invasion of Ukraine," they informed the world in an article on the death of Petrov in combat (not mentioned by CrimethInc is the fact that he died fighting alongside comrades-in-arms of the far-right Bratstvo Battalion.)

Some in the collective, we're told, believe that serving a state military can never advance the anarchist cause, while others think it's understandable given the Russian regime. "If we reject state militarism" is supposedly an open question for anarchists rather than a definite line and practice. For CrimethInc, it may be possible to separate means from ends and still somehow be advancing anarchism rather than statism, but for others it is not.

Better to fight, live and die on our own terms than to serve as cannon fodder for the privileged authorities.

For Bushnell, the question of his own participation in the Armed Forces of the US and its relation to Palestine wasn't so murky.

The collective's text on Bushnell's action seems to above all serve their own interests, not the truth of the matter, or the struggle of the oppressed, or the refusal of complicity in oppression exemplified by Bushnell.

This also reflects, to some extent, a historic split within the anarchist movement around colonialism and war.

As the Jewish Lithuanian-American anarchists Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman put it during World War 1 in their print journal *Mother Earth*, "The humblest soldier who now refuses military service or is guilty of insubordination — and there seem to be many such instances according to private reports — contributes more towards the resurrection of the international solidarity of the people than all the diplomats, the Kropotkins and the Jean Graves."

Peter Kropotkin and Jean Grave having been prominent anarchists who flipped, becoming open supporters of the French, Belgian and allied camp in the great war for colonies.

Through victory in WW1, France won Syria and Lebanon; Britain won Palestine, Jordan and Iraq; and Belgium won Rwanda-Burundi; among other colonies or so-called mandates. The current Israeli and allied camp's colonial war against Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, the war of occupation that Bushnell fought so bravely against, is in part a result of that great war that some traitors to anarchism like Kropotkin championed but principled anarchists like Goldman and Berkman opposed.

Bushnell has found his place among the many great principled anarchists of history who opposed militarism and colonial war.

Cause and Effect

CrimethInc's answer to their own question as to the efficacy of Bushnell's action is that "Unfortunately, the authorities have never been especially moved by the deaths of US military personnel."

All the collective has to say about Bushnell's military identity is that state officials won't care about him and what he did, even though he was one of their own. This is despite Bushnell himself having stated that his intent was to refuse his own complicity as an active duty member of the Armed Forces, specifically in protest against the colonization of Palestine and in favour of Palestinian freedom. Bushnell did not say anything about persuading the authorities, only that the genocide in Palestine is what our ruling class has decided will be normal.

"As a tactic," CrimethInc claims, "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," CrimethInc further explains, "This strategy presumes that the authorities are concerned with the protester's well-being in the first place."

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

All of these claims are incorrect, and not only because Bushnell himself indicated otherwise, or because the positive response to his action by people in Palestine and Yemen shows otherwise, as important as all this certainly is.

In reality, neither the hunger strike nor the self-immolation tactic can be defined as being exclusively or inherently directed at persuading authorities to change course.

Furthermore, the best way to invoke fear in the powerful is not the only possible motivation for choosing a tactic. It is also possible to try to inspire others to action, and not just the exact same type of action as one has taken themselves.

The primary factor in use of the hunger strike or self-immolation tactic is the resistance of the person who engages in such an action.

The secondary factor is the response of the rest of the world, of social movements acting in solidarity with the hunger striker or self-immolator's fight, and in carrying on the struggle of the hunger-striker or self-immolator, which in this case is the struggle to free Palestine.

The world is not solely populated by politicians and officials, and there is historical precedent of social movements responding to and supporting hunger strikers and self-immolators.

CrimethInc in their article on Bushnell's action refer to their previous writing on the 2011 self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, claiming that the relation between the emergence of a powerful social movement and his action was a paradox, and condescendingly framing Bouazizi as a coward in relation to the option he could have taken of staying alive, so as to continue participating in social struggle.

The only real paradox is that CrimethInc's analysis contradicts the reality of what actually took place. An entire social uprising resulted from Bouazizi's action, something that has yet to

materialize due to anything CrimethInc has been able to say by staying alive, under much more privileged conditions than Bouazizi.

Berkman and Goldman, in *Mother Earth* in January of 1911, had written of the suicide protest of the prisoner and Socialist Revolutionary Party member Yegor Sazonov and “five of his fellow-sufferers in Eastern Siberia”, which had led to “student uprisings” in Russia. The prisoners “hoped that this news would break through the prison walls, would travel to civilization and disclose the actual conditions of horror and torture prevailing in Russian prisons,” and, “they were not mistaken.”

The target audience, if it was that, was the people of Russia, not just the authorities, and the people became more than an audience, as they later did in Tunisia too. If one wishes to project their own more limited perspective onto Sazonov, Bouazizi or Bushnell, they have only themselves to blame.

Affirmation not Despair

Beyond just the issue of tactics and their efficacy, CrimethInc are guilty of the kind of crude reduction, as described in other words by Hannah Zeavin in Bookforum, of self-immolation to suicide, not to mention the crude reduction of suicide itself to “self-destruction.”

Bushnell “didn’t have thoughts of suicide,” his friend Levi Pierpont reminded us, “he had thoughts of justice, that’s what this was about, it wasn’t about his life, it was about using his life to send a message.”

“Do not frame this as a mental health issue,” About Face suggested.

Bushnell “was clear to the depths of his being about why he was doing it,” Amani Rayan of Jericho reaffirmed.

But CrimethInc couldn’t help themselves, stating that “too often, despair and self-sacrifice mingle and blur together, offering an all-too-simple escape from tragedies that appear unsolvable.”

Bushnell and Bouazizi were too afraid and too quickly sought an easy way out, according to CrimethInc’s condescending and confused narrative.

But the point of self-immolation is not simply to die, nor is it to encourage emulation. It is to take on the responsibility and the possibility of clearly taking action and speaking the truth, and in Bushnell’s case, of irrefutably acting against one’s own complicity within an oppressive system.

Ironically, it appears that it is precisely the undeniable clarity of Bushnell’s action, identity and intent that provokes fear in CrimethInc, causing them to retreat into empty bluster about bravery, and into deflection, not only from Bushnell’s meaning but also from their own sense of complicity as a civilian media outlet who’ve decided to represent the anarchist movement as a whole and to mould the minds of impressionable youth.

Self-immolation is not just suicide, it is not just about despair, but then again neither is suicide, which is a heart-rending affirmation that our lives are not simply the private property of another, and an affirmation that there must be more to life than suffering.

Certainly, it is commendable to try to prevent suicide as a general phenomenon, if not each individual act. Not only soldiers but also Indigenous peoples face disproportionate rates of suicide. But as the First Nations Health Authority in British Columbia puts it, they believe “the best way

to prevent suicide is to promote protective factors such as family connectedness and emotional safety.”

“Eliminating suicide requires the concerted effort of our relations,” they further explain.

In other words, the solution is to change social conditions, to create reasons to live for everyone, not to morally condemn from a high-horse in an attempt to instill shame, as CrimethInc does, in all too Christian and colonial of a fashion. Shaming only contributes to the conditions that provoke suicide in the first place.

“Life must never become a habit,” wrote the socialist Anna Strunsky in 1915, describing these as words from a loved one, fictionalized or otherwise, Strunsky having been a fellow traveller of anarchists like Goldman and Kropotkin.

Life, Strunsky reiterated, “must be a triumph, it must be a consecration.”

In death, it was possible that “Life spoke with all her voices,” wrote Strunsky, tearing asunder the moralistic binary that CrimethInc would later try to rebuild.

The industrial unionist T-Bone Slim wrote in 1937 that “Scientists are toiling day and night to lengthen our lives.”

He affirmed, “We don’t want it, we want it thickened; it’s too damned thin now and if they stretch and stretch it, ’twill break in the middle.”

Our lives are not just a mere quantity of time to be lived in the service of oppressors, or of morality, a form of self-denial perhaps worse than death. Our lives are also qualitative, and they share the quality of being our own as well as shared with others, of being potential reservoirs of freedom and decisiveness. Our lives are to be lived not simply by being strung along by those who don’t have to live our lives, or even help us to better live them.

We owe more to ourselves, to our communities, to life and the living, as much as the dead, than a certain anarchist media collective is brave enough to even look at, let alone reflect back to us, or properly reflect upon themselves. In taking up the responsibility they won’t, we affirm our individual and collective freedom and refuse complicity with the oppression of our many companions and relatives.

Aaron Bushnell lives on in the collective struggle of others, and no pretentious media sophistry can ever change that.

Resources

Palestine Children’s Relief Fund

Call or Text 9-8-8 (Suicide Crisis Hotline Canada)

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (USA)

KUU-US First Nations and Aboriginal Crisis Line Support Available 24 Hrs – 1-800-588-8717

Suicide Prevention – First Nations Health Authority

We Matter Campaign

GI Rights Hotline

About Face: Veterans Against The War

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