

His final message: “I will no longer be complicit in genocide”

Opposing genocide in Gaza, US Air Force soldier live-streams self-immolation in front of Israeli embassy

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In a fatal Sunday afternoon protest, livestreamed and conducted in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington D.C., Aaron Bushnell, a 25-year-old active duty Air Force member, declared his opposition to participating in the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. He then proceeded to douse himself in an accelerant and light himself on fire. His last words were “Free Palestine.”

Video of Bushnell’s deadly protest quickly spread on social media. In the just over three-minute video, Bushnell, wearing his combat fatigues, begins by introducing himself and declaring, “I am an active duty member of the United States Air Force, and I will no longer be complicit in genocide.” As he continues to walk in his uniform, he calmly explains, “I am 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 is not extreme at all. This is what our ruling class has decided will be normal.”

Bushnell, with a container of liquid in his left hand, continued to walk for about 30 seconds until he reached the front of the Israeli embassy. After placing his camera down—with it facing towards the front of the embassy—Bushnell walked up to the gate and drenched himself with a liquid, declaring, “Free Palestine!” He then pulled out a lighter and attempted to ignite himself.

Off-camera, a man’s voice is heard asking, “Can I help you, sir?” For approximately 15 seconds, Bushnell was not able to light the accelerant, yet the voice off-camera made no attempt to get the lighter from Bushnell. Once the fire did catch, Bushnell was quickly drenched in flames. As the fire consumed Bushnell, he screamed repeatedly, “Free Palestine!”

As Bushnell was burning, several voices were heard off-camera. One person yelled, “Man on fire!” while another was heard repeatedly yelling, “Get on the ground!” As sirens blared and tires screeched, Bushnell eventually collapsed on the ground. Nearly a minute after ignition, a police officer is observed using a fire extinguisher on Bushnell’s now charred and immobile body.

Despite the fact that Bushnell obviously presented no threat to

anyone but himself, an armed agent is observed on the tape pointing a gun at Bushnell as he continued to burn on the ground for the remainder of the video. The police agent (it is unclear as of this writing if he is with the Israeli embassy or the US Secret Service) continued to point his weapon at Bushnell even as one of the police officers is heard yelling, “I don’t need guns, I need fire extinguishers.”

In his last social media post, Bushnell wrote, “Many of us like to ask ourselves, ‘What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?’ The answer is, you’re doing it. Right now.”

On his LinkedIn account, Bushnell listed that he had been full-time with the US Air Force since May 2020, with his last assignment being a “DevOps Engineer” in San Antonio, Texas. Bushnell wrote that he was looking to “transition out of the US Air Force into software engineering.”

In January, the *Intercept* reported that since November of 2023, the US Air Force had deployed officers specializing in “targeting intelligence” specifically for airstrikes and long-range artillery weapons to Israel. While it is unclear as of this writing if Bushnell received orders to deploy, there is no question that he was deeply troubled by the US military’s role in the ongoing slaughter.

Bushnell was influenced by anarchist politics. On the day of his self-immolation, the young man emailed anarchist publications, such as *crimethinc*, alerting them that he planned to “engage in an extreme act of protest against the genocide of the Palestinian people.” He provided links to the livestream and recorded footage of the “event” and asked that the “footage is preserved and reported on.”

In a statement issued on Monday, Serve The People Akron, based out of Akron, Ohio, released a statement confirming that Aaron “was a valued member of our organization and the community who immediately jumping to help the unhoused and any project that came up. He was dependable and persistent and the mutual aid

work he did in a city that still new to him. We will be forever grateful for the effort he put in to make Akron a better place.”

Several memorials and vigils have already been planned and held in honor of Bushnell. On Monday outside of the Israeli embassy in the same place the young man set himself on fire, dozens of protesters held a memorial service. On a large canvas, attendees wrote phrases in English and Arabic in support of Bushnell. One message read, “Dear Aaron, We are sorry the world has failed you, just like it has failed the people of Gaza. May you rest in peace.”

Bushnell’s death is a tragic event and an indictment of all the governments and political tendencies responsible for the slaughter. Chief among them are the Israeli and US governments, followed by their NATO allies. However, a special place is reserved for those that continue to proffer illusions in the perpetrators and facilitators of genocide. In the United States, this includes the Democratic Socialists of America, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and the forces behind the “Uncommitted” charade, who continue to prop up the Biden administration and the Democratic Party.

Despite widespread opposition to the mass murder and starvation of Palestinians, major media outlets, including the *New York Times*, NPR, Reuters, CNN and *Washington Post*, did not report on the protest for several hours and when they did, the headlines were deliberately vague in order to mask the political content of Bushnell’s devastating demonstration.

“Airman Dies After Setting Himself On Fire Outside Israeli Embassy in Washington” was the headline in the *New York Times*. “U.S. airman dies after setting himself on fire outside the Israeli Embassy” read the NPR headline. The *Post* similarly declared, “Airman dies after setting himself on fire outside Israeli Embassy in D.C.” CNN and Reuters both went with the equally useless, “US airman sets himself on fire outside Israeli embassy in Washington.”

This self-censorship by the capitalist press is of a piece of their conduct since the outset of the US-backed Israeli slaughter in Gaza. Since the first week in October, American press outlets have blasted out Israeli propaganda, while blacking out daily protests against US involvement in the war. At the same time, the Biden administration and the entire US political establishment slanders tens of thousands of students and demonstrators as “antisemitic” for exercising their First Amendment rights to oppose genocide.

Continuing their filthy role, major media outlets that have begun to report on the incident are using the catch-all term of “mental illness” in order to cover up the political content of Bushnell’s extreme protest and portray it as the product of defects in his psyche, not the sickness of American society and the mass revulsion produced by the foreign policy of American imperialism.

But from all accounts, Bushnell was not suffering from any mental illness, and he is not even the first American to self-immolate in response to the ongoing slaughter in Gaza. On December 1, 2023 a

woman protester, whom Atlanta police have refused to identify, drenched herself in gasoline and lit herself on fire outside the Israeli consulate in Atlanta, Georgia. The woman was carrying a Palestinian flag at the time.

These extreme protests are a reaction to the barbaric violence that US society inflicts on workers and their families around the world. Decades of endless war have brutalized American society. Attempts by the population to effect change through the ballot box are denied as the big business parties, with the media in tow, do everything in their power to ban socialist and left-wing viewpoints. For decades the two parties have funneled society’s resources away from social programs and into war, including over \$1 trillion last year.

Decades of imperialist war in the Middle East, Africa and Asia have led to over 40 million refugees and nearly 10 million deaths. US imperialist violence does not stay outside its borders, no matter how many rolls of concertina wire are deployed along the US-Mexico border. It pervades every aspect of US society, from a soldier suffering from PTSD massacring adults and children at a bowling alley in Maine, to daily police killings that have topped over 1,000 a year in the US for over a decade.

The lives and bodies of workers and young people, whether Palestinian or American, are worth nothing to the ruling class unless they can be turned into soldiers or profit. The bipartisan embrace of genocide in Gaza, which has been supported by the political establishments of the US, Israel and other imperialist countries, is the end of the line for capitalist politics in America.



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