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BY ALFRED DE ZAYAS

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US Airman Aaron Bushnell's Self-Immolation Outside the Israeli Embassy In Washington D.C.



Aaron Bushnell moments before lighting himself on fire to protest the genocide in Gaza.

The live-streaming and subsequent videos of US active duty airman Aaron Bushnell's extreme sacrifice in front of the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C. on Sunday 25 February 2024 should make us reflect on the complicity of our governments in the on-going genocide being perpetrated by Israel on the hapless Palestinian people. 30,000 dead – overwhelmingly civilians, women and children.

The self-immolation brings back memories of the Vietnamese monks who self-immolated in the 1960s in protest against the oppressive Saigon government and the US aggression of

their country. Further self-immolations took place in the United States, including on 16 March 1965, Alice Herz, an 82-year old peace activist, in front of the Federal Department Store in Detroit, Norman Morrison, a 31-year old Quaker pacifist, who poured kerosene over himself and set himself alight outside the Pentagon, and Robert LaPorte in front of the United Nations.

It reminds us of the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi who in 2010 self-immolated in protest against the police brutality of the Tunisian government, and whose sacrifice was the occasion that triggered what came to be known as the “Arab spring”, and which I consider more like a neo-colonial effort on the part of the US and Europe to cement their control in the MENA region. Of course, there were real home-grown grievances against authoritarian and corrupt governments, but the US-driven “colour revolutions” made a chill come over the region, an Arab winter with perpetual wars in Libya, Syria, Yemen, etc.

Aaron Bushnell, a young man of 25 with all of his life before him, performed the ultimate protest to make the point against the indifference of the world in the face of the Israeli genocide in Gaza, a continuing tragedy which Professor Norman Finkelstein has documented in his comprehensive book *GAZA*^[1] and in his numerous articles and television appearances.

On the video, minutes before setting himself ablaze, Bushnell said with a quiet, measured, resolute voice: “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’s not extreme at all.” Bushnell was a respected and loved cyber defence operations specialist with the 531st intelligence support squadron at Joint Base San Antonio, Texas.

In an interview with *Newsweek* Senator Bernie Sanders said “It’s obviously a terrible tragedy, but I think it speaks to the depths of despair that so many people are feeling now about the horrific humanitarian disaster taking place in Gaza, and I share those deep concerns.... The United States has got to stand up to Netanyahu and make sure this does not continue.”^[2]

Yes, a genocide is unfolding before our eyes. Articles 2 and 3 of the Genocide Convention are clearly engaged, and the issue of “intent” is overwhelmingly established in pages 57-69 of the legal brief submitted by South Africa to the ICJ. On television and the internet we watch the bombardments of hospitals, schools, UN shelters.

While the entire world is clamouring for a cease-fire, the U.S. government abused the veto power in the Security Council three times to block the three draft resolutions on a cease-

fire. The United States and other countries that continue delivering lethal weapons to Israel, weapons that have been used and are being used to perpetrate the genocide, are complicit in genocide under article III e of the Convention. Any state party to the Convention can refer the matter directly to the ICJ pursuant to article 9 of the Convention. Accordingly, not only Israel, but also the US, UK, France and Germany should be on the dock[3].

On 26 January 2024 the International Court of Justice issued a comprehensive order of “provisional measures”[4] of protection, an injunction, which is legally binding under article 41 of the Statute of the ICJ, and which Israel has systematically violated, as it violated the ICJ’s earlier Advisory Opinion on the Wall, dated 9 July 2004[5].

On 16 February the ICJ published a decision on the South African second request for additional measures of protection:

“The Court notes that the most recent developments in the Gaza Strip, and in Rafah in particular, ‘would exponentially increase what is already a humanitarian nightmare with untold regional consequences’, as stated by the United Nations Secretary-General (Remarks to the General Assembly on priorities for 2024 (7 Feb. 2024)). This perilous situation demands immediate and effective implementation of the provisional measures indicated by the Court in its Order of 26 January 2024, which are applicable throughout the Gaza Strip, including in Rafah, and does not demand the indication of additional provisional measures. The Court emphasizes that the State of Israel remains bound to fully comply with its obligations under the Genocide Convention and with the said Order, including by ensuring the safety and security of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.”[6]

Notwithstanding the ICJ proceedings and the proceedings before the International Criminal Court, Israel’s onslaught on 2.3 million Palestinians continues.

While I understand Aaron Bushnell’s motivation and his noble hope that his self-immolation would make an impact on our politicians, I fear that the deep-seated cynicism in the US and Israeli governments and the cavalier attitude of the mainstream media will effectively give carte blanche to Biden and Netanyahu, who will continue ignoring all calls for a cease-fire and will very soon “cancel” the memory of Bushnell’s sacrifice.

In our modern world, Aaron Bushnell’s extreme protest appears to be anachronistic, from a distant bygone era. We read about it, and it almost sounds like fiction. It may not accomplish anything, because our politicians are committed to war – in Gaza as in Ukraine — no matter what the majority of the world thinks, no matter what the International Court

of Justice will rule on the 1948 Genocide Convention and its concrete application in the case of the Gaza genocide.

It is rare to see someone today actually following his principles and going through to the ultimate (and excruciatingly painful) sacrifice. In my opinion, and in that of many peace activists, it would have been more sensible to live for the cause of peace and not to die in protest against a criminal war. Peace-making is work-in-progress, a daily commitment.

The deconstruction and desacralization of Western society have made gestures as Aaron Bushnell's harder to relate to than in the past, because our society has lost its moral compass, its capacity for empathy. Indeed, Western society is impregnated with cynicism to such a degree that a sacrifice for a cause greater than oneself seems incomprehensible, a far harder concept to grasp intellectually — let alone feel — for modern rootless materialists.

Ms. Lupe Barboza of the Care Collective in Texas said that Bushnell had developed deep friendships with people living in encampments and would regularly purchase blankets, sweaters and snacks from a store on base to give out. In the days before his death, Bushnell wrote his will detailing his final wishes that he shared with close friends. “He took all the steps he needed to make sure that everything he had would be cared for, like his cat, he designated that to his neighbour. ... So yeah, that to me is all the sense of someone who was measured and knew what he was doing.”^[7]

I urge fellow Americans and the US military, especially Bushnell's Air Force comrades, to demand that the US government stop supplying arms to Israel immediately and that the US cease blocking the Security Council when a resolution is tabled by Algeria or any other country.

We know that the world stood and watched when Pol Pot massacred his own people in Cambodia in the 1970s, the world did nothing to stop the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Today it is up to us to demand accountability. We must all stand together against the genocide in Gaza.

And if we really mean it, we should also pray for the victims of this senseless slaughter in Gaza, we should pray for the soul of Senior Airman Bushnell. I would like to see a bronze monument erected to him, exactly where he self-immolated himself. His extreme sacrifice must not be forgotten.

As a practising Catholic, I will have Masses read for his soul. I also extend my deepest sympathies to his family and friends. God bless his soul. *Requiescat in pace.*

Notes.

- [1] <https://www.normanfinkelstein.com/books/gaza-an-inquest-into-its-martyrdom/>
- [2] <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/bernie-sanders-breaks-silence-on-aaron-bushnell-self-immolation/ar-BB1iWaYf>
- [3] https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf?ref=readthemapple.com
- [4] <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240126-sum-01-00-en.pdf>
- [5] <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/131>
- [6] <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240216-pre-01-00-en.pdf>
- [7] <https://www.npr.org/2024/02/25/1233810136/fire-man-israeli-embassy-washington>

*Alfred de Zayas is a law professor at the Geneva School of Diplomacy and served as a UN Independent Expert on International Order 2012-18. He is the author of twelve books including “[Building a Just World Order](#)” (2021) “*Countering Mainstream Narratives*” 2022, and “*The Human Rights Industry*” (Clarity Press, 2021).*

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