**[Facing the Shadow](https://www.dawn.com/news/1820655/facing-the-shadow)**

[Zarrar Khuhro](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1915/zarrar-khuhro) Published March 11, 2024 Updated a day ago

IT has been over five months since Israel’s genocidal war on Gaza and the Palestinian people began. Tens of thousands of Palestinians have been massacred, and hundreds more die daily. Millions are homeless and at risk of death from starvation, exhaustion and disease. Every day, we hear of more horrors and there is no end in sight. There are sights that we can never un-see, images that have seared themselves in our minds — children reduced to skin and bones, people crushed flat under tanks.

Across the world, and in particular in the same Western capitals that bankroll this war and provide diplomatic cover for Israel, we have seen millions pour out onto the streets calling for a ceasefire and for a free Palestine. The actions taken have been many and varied. Pro-Israel businesses have been boycotted, and weapons manufacturers sending arms to Israel blockaded.

But what 25-year-old Aaron Bushnell — an active-duty member of the US Air Force and a resident of San Antonio, Texas — did was something else entirely. He recorded himself walking up to the gate of the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C. — dressed in full combat fatigues — and saying that he would not be complicit in the genocide supported by his country’s government. He then poured petrol over himself and set himself on fire. With his dying breath, he screamed, “Free Palestine”.

The morning before this act, he wrote on Facebook, “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.”

What Aaron Bushnell did was something else entirely.

This wasn’t the first such attempt to draw attention to Palestine. In December last year, a protester set themselves on fire outside the Israeli consulate in Atlanta, Georgia, surviving with severe burns. However, there has been no follow-up on the story. We don’t even know the protester’s name or how they are because this story, like so many others that go against the prevailing pro-Israel narrative in the Western media, was buried.

Bushnell’s actions bring to mind others who have given their lives in protest for a cause they believed in, or against an action they could not bring themselves to commit. People like Franz Jäggerstäter, an Austrian Roman Catholic, who refused to serve in the Nazi army in World War II, saying it was against his moral and religious beliefs. Despite being sentenced to death, he refused to serve the genocidal regime that ruled him and was executed. Like Bushnell, he gave his life for a cause he believed in.

Bushnell also reminds us of Thich Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk who set himself on fire in 1963 in protest against the anti-Buddhist policies of the South Vietnamese government. His picture made history, and the man who took the picture, Malcolm Browne won the World Press Photo of the Year.

No less a person than John F. Kennedy said of the photograph, “No news picture in history has generated so much emotion around the world as that one.” Will Bushnell’s picture be treated the same way? Certainly not by the Western media. On the day of his death, no Western media network even bothered to write in the headline which cause he had died for. NPR went a step further, saying that they could not ‘verify’ Bushnell’s motives, despite him having quite literally spelled them out on camera.

Newsweek’s headline ran: “Bushnell death report reveals police call about ‘mental distress’.” The headline implies Bushnell had previously suffered from ‘mental distress’, inviting the reader to think of him as unstable and un­­ba­lanced, but if you read the article, you find that the ‘police call’ in question is about him setting himself on fire.

Then there’s the Washington Post, that hallowed torch-bearer of American ‘journalism’, whose headline reads: ‘Airman who set himself on fire grew up in religious compound, had anarchist past.’ What they do not tell you, however, is that the religious compound was that of the Church of the Transfiguration — a twisted pro-Israel, Christian Zionist cult that his own parents were members of. It was this indoctrination that Bushnell rebelled against but the headline makes it seem as though Bushnell was the fanatic.

As for ‘anarchist’, the term conjures up images of nihilistic terrorism in most minds but what Bushnell espoused was a life-affirming ideology; he spent hours every week helping homeless persons and marginalised communities, who are now paying tribute to this great man. Will the spark he lit take hold? Will his sacrifice go in vain? We do not know. But we do know that Bushnell, like myself and many others, was a huge fan of Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings. It is perhaps fitting, then, that he gave his life fighting the Shadow that threatens to consume us all.

*The writer is a journalist.*

**X:** [**@zarrarkhuhro**](https://twitter.com/ZarrarKhuhro)

*Published in Dawn, March 11th, 2024*