

Why Would Anyone Kill Themselves to Stop a War? On Aaron Bushnell and Others. Ann Wright

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Six years ago in 2018, after returning from a Veterans For Peace trip to Vietnam, I wrote an article called "[Why Would Anyone Kill One's Self In an Attempt to Stop A War?](#)"

Now, six years later, in the past three months, two people in the United States have taken or risked taking their own lives in an attempt to change U.S. policies on [Palestine](#) and call for a cease-fire and stop U.S. funding to the State of Israel that would be used to kill in the Israeli genocide of [Gaza](#). A yet unidentified woman, wrapped in a Palestinian flag, set herself on fire in front of the Israeli consulate in Atlanta, Georgia, on December 1, 2023. Three months later authorities have yet to release the name of the woman. Her condition [was unknown](#) as of mid-December.

This week, on Sunday, February 25, 2024, active duty U.S. Air Force member **Aaron Bushnell** set himself on fire at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., while he was stating "Free Palestine and stop the genocide." Bushnell [died](#) from his injuries.

Content Warning: Viewers may find the following video disturbing. It shows the moments leading up to and including Bushnell's final act. The moment of self-immolation itself has been blurred.

The last walk of Aaron Bushnell, a 25-year-old member of the US Air Force who self-immolated outside the Israeli embassy in Washington in protest against US involvement in Israel's genocide in Gaza. <https://t.co/FwAAH0GJ8B>

— Lowkey (@LowkeyOnline) [February 26, 2024](#)

As I mentioned in the [article in 2018](#), many in U.S. admire young men and women who join the military and profess to be willing to give up their lives for whatever the U.S. politicians or government decide is best for another country—“freedom and democracy” for those who don’t have the U.S. version of it, or overthrowing self-rule that is not compatible with the U.S. administration’s view. Actual U.S. national security seldom has anything to do with U.S. invasions and occupations of other countries.

But, what about a private citizen giving up his or her life to try to stop the politicians or government from deciding what is best for other countries? Could a “mere” citizen be so concerned about politicians’ or government actions that she or he is willing to die to bring public attention to those actions?

One well-known and several little-known actions of private citizens from five decades ago provide us with the answers.

While on a Veterans for Peace trip to Vietnam in 2014 and while on another VFP delegation in March 2018, our delegation saw the iconic photo of a well-known Buddhist monk **Thich Quang Duc** who set himself on fire in June 1963 on a busy street in Saigon to protest the Diem regime’s crackdown on Buddhists during the early days of the American war on Vietnam. That photo is seared into our collective memories.



Journalist Malcolm Browne’s photograph of Quảng Đức during his self-immolation. (From the Public Domain)

The [photos](#) show hundreds of monks surrounding the square to keep the police out so that Quang Duc could complete his sacrifice. The self-immolation became a turning point in the Buddhist crisis and a pivotal act in the collapse of the Diem regime in the early days of the American war on Vietnam.

But, did you know that several Americans also set themselves on fire to attempt to end U.S. military actions during those turbulent war years in the 1960s?

I didn't, until our VFP delegation saw the portraits displayed of five Americans who gave their lives to protest the American war on Vietnam, among other international persons who are revered in Vietnamese history, at the Vietnam-USA Friendship Society in Hanoi. Though these American peace persons have fallen into oblivion in their own nation, they are well-known martyrs in Vietnam, 50 years later.



Portraits displayed in the Friendship Society Building in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Our 2014 delegation of 17—six Vietnam veterans, three Vietnam-era vets, one Iraq-era vet, and seven civilian peace activists—with four Veterans for Peace members who live in Vietnam, met with members of the Vietnam-USA Friendship Society at their headquarters in Hanoi. I returned to Vietnam in March 2018 with another Veterans for Peace delegation. After seeing one particular portrait again—that of Norman Morrison—I decided to write about these Americans who were willing to end their own lives in an attempt to stop the American war on the Vietnamese people.

What distinguished these Americans to the Vietnamese was that, as American soldiers were killing Vietnamese, there were American citizens who ended their own lives in order to try to bring the terror of invasion and occupation for Vietnamese citizens to the American public through the horror of their own deaths.

The first person in the United States to die of self-immolation in opposition to the war on Vietnam was 82-year-old **Quaker Alice Herz** who lived in Detroit, Michigan. She set herself on fire on a Detroit street on March 16, 1965. Before she died of her burns 10 days later, Alice said she set herself on fire to protest “the arms race and a president using his high office to wipe out small nations.”

Six months later on November 2, 1965, **Norman Morrison**, a 31-year-old Quaker from Baltimore, a father of three young children, died of self-immolation at the Pentagon. Morrison felt that traditional protests against the war had done little to end the war and decided that setting himself on fire at the Pentagon might mobilize enough people to force the United States government to abandon its involvement in Vietnam. Morrison's choice to self-immolate was particularly symbolic in that it followed President Lyndon Johnson's controversial decision to authorize the use of napalm in Vietnam, a burning gel that sticks to the skin and melts the flesh.

Image: A photo shows the portrait of Norman Morrison at the Vietnam-USA Friendship Society in Hanoi, Vietnam.



Apparently, unbeknownst to Morrison, he chose to set himself on fire beneath the Pentagon window of then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.

Thirty years later in his 1995 memoir, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy in Lessons of Vietnam*, McNamara remembered Morrison's death:

Antiwar protests had been sporadic and limited up to this time and had not compelled attention. Then came the afternoon of November 2, 1965. At twilight that day, a young Quaker named Norman R. Morrison, father of three and an officer of the Stony Run Friends Meeting in Baltimore, burned himself to death within 40 feet of my Pentagon window. Morrison's death was a tragedy not only for his family but also for me in the country. It was an outcry against the killing that was destroying the lives of so many Vietnamese and American youth.

I reacted to the horror of his action by bottling up my emotions and avoided talking about them with anyone—even with my family. I knew (his wife) Marge and our three children shared many of Morrison's feelings about the war. And I believed I understood and shared some of his thoughts. The episode created tension at home that only deepened as the criticism of the war continued to grow.

Before his memoir *In Retrospect* was published, in a 1992 article in *Newsweek*, McNamara had listed people or events that had had an impact on his questioning of the war. One of those events, McNamara identified as "the death of a young Quaker."

One week after Norman Morrison's death, **Roger LaPorte**, 22, a Catholic Worker, became the third war protester to take his own life. He died of burns suffered through self-immolation on November 9, 1965 on the United Nations Plaza in New York City. He left a note that read, "I am against war, all wars. I did this as a religious act."

The three protest deaths in 1965 mobilized the anti-war community to begin weekly vigils at the White House and Congress. And every week, Quakers were arrested on the steps of the Capitol as they read the names of the American dead, according to David Hartsough, one of the delegates on our 2014 VFP trip.

Hartsough, who participated in anti-war vigils 50 years earlier, described how they convinced some members of Congress to join them. **Rep. George Brown** (D-Calif.) became the first member of Congress to do so. After the Quakers were arrested and jailed for

reading the names of the war dead, Brown would continue to read the names, enjoying congressional immunity from arrest.

Two years later, on October 15, 1967, **Florence Beaumont**, a 56-year-old Unitarian mother of two, set herself on fire in front of the Federal Building in Los Angeles. Her husband George later said,

“Florence had a deep feeling against the slaughter in Vietnam... She was a perfectly normal, dedicated person, and felt she had to do this just like those who burned themselves in Vietnam. The barbarous napalm that burns the bodies of the Vietnamese children has seared the souls of all who, like Florence Beaumont, do not have ice water for blood, stones for hearts. The match that Florence used to touch off her gasoline-soaked clothing has lighted a fire that will not go out—ever—a fire under us complacent, smug fat cats so damned secure in our ivory towers 9,000 miles from exploding napalm, and THAT, we are sure, is the purpose of her act.”

Three years later, on May 10, 1970, 23-year-old **George Winne, Jr.**, son of a Navy captain and a student at the University of California, San Diego, [set himself on fire](#) on the university's Revelle Plaza next to a sign that said “In God's name, end this war.”

Winne's death came just six days after the Ohio National Guard fired into a crowd of Kent State University student protesters, killing four and wounding nine, during the largest wave of protests in the history of American higher education.

At our 2014 meeting at the Vietnam-USA Friendship Society office in Hanoi, David Hartsough presented *Held in the Light*, a book written by Ann Morrison, the widow of Norman Morrison, to Ambassador Chin, a retired Vietnamese ambassador to the United Nations and now an official of the Society. Hartsough also read a letter from Ann Morrison to the people of Vietnam.

Ambassador Chin responded by telling the group that the acts of Norman Morrison and other Americans in ending their lives are well remembered by the people of Vietnam. He added that every Vietnamese school child learns a song and poem written by Vietnamese poet [Tố Hữu](#) called “Emily, My Child” dedicated to the young daughter that Morrison was holding only moments before he set himself on fire at the Pentagon. The poem reminds Emily that her father died because he felt he had to object in the most visible way to the deaths of Vietnamese children at the hands of the United States government.

Sparking Revolutions

In other parts of the world, people have ended their lives to bring attention to special issues. The Arab Spring began on December 17, 2010 with a 26-year-old street Tunisian vendor named **Mohamed Bouazizi** setting himself on fire after a policewoman confiscated his food street vending cart. He was the only breadwinner for his family and had to frequently bribe police in order to operate his cart.

His death sparked citizens throughout the Middle East to challenge their repressive governments. Some administrations were forced from power by the citizens, including Tunisian **President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali**, who had ruled with an iron fist for 23 years.

Or Being Ignored as Irrational Acts

In the United States, acts of conscience such as taking one's own life for an issue of extraordinary importance to the individual are viewed as irrational and the government and media minimize their importance.

For this generation, while thousands of U.S. citizens are arrested and many serve time in county jails or federal prisons for protesting U.S. government policies, in April, 2015, young **Leo Thornton** joined a small but important number of women and men who have chosen to publicly end their lives in hopes of bringing the attention of the American public to change specific U.S policies.

On April 13, 2015, Leo Thornton, 22 years old, committed suicide by gun on the West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol. He had tied to his wrist a placard that read "Tax the 1%." Did his act of conscience have any effect on Washington—the White House or the U.S. Congress? Unfortunately, not.

The following week, the Republican-led House of Representatives passed legislation that would eliminate the estate tax applying only to the top 1% of estates. And no mention of Leo Thornton, and his decision to end his life over inequitable taxation, appeared in the media to remind us that he ended his life in opposition to another piece of favorable legislation for the rich.

Then years ago, in October 2013, 64-year-old Vietnam veteran **John Constantino** set himself on fire on the Washington, D.C. National Mall—again for something he believed in. An eyewitness to Constantino's death said Constantino spoke about "voter rights" or "voting rights." Another witness said he gave a "sharp salute" toward the Capitol before he lit himself on fire. A neighbor who was contacted by a local reporter said Constantino believed the government "doesn't look out for us and they don't care about anything but their own pockets."

The media didn't investigate any further into the rationale for Constantino's taking his own life in a public place in the nation's capital.

In the case of U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Aaron Bushnell, Aaron told the world his reason:

"I do not want to be complacent in the genocide of Gaza! Free Palestine!"

His sentiments are echoed by hundreds of millions around the world who recognize the horrific Israeli genocide of Gaza. For U.S. citizens, it is our duty to keep pressure on the Biden administration to stop funding Israel's genocide of Gaza and violence in the West Bank.

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Mongolia. In December 2001 she was on the small team that reopened the US Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. She is the co-author of the book "Dissent: Voices of Conscience."

Featured image: Self-immolation of Aaron Bushnell (Licensed under Fair Use)

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