



# Councilmembers

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Reference Topic: Brandon Bryant

To Whom it May Concern,

On December 19, a video was posted to YouTube depicting Staff Sergeant Brandon Bryant threatening the Missoula City Council. Let us be very clear that we all condemn in the strongest possible terms any and all threats of violence against anyone. Prior to this, Brandon had been actively appearing at city council meetings speaking out about the use of Tax Increment Financing in Missoula. Brandon was attempting to fulfill his role as a responsible citizen and use his voice to make a positive impact in his community. Unfortunately, after an edited version of Brandon's video was sent to council members, the resulting fear caused citizen/council cooperation to grind to a standstill. After Brandon's arrest many community activists stated that they were wary about voicing their opinions in front of the council lest they be the next victims of what they perceived to be political retribution.

Brandon's Background as an internationally prominent whistleblower is a fundamental part of his story that must be communicated in order to understand Brandon and his actions. Brandon was a drone operator in the United States Air Force. After his honorable discharge he spoke out about his experience in the drone program. It is important to note that he never revealed any classified information or revealed sensitive security information in any way. Brandon's role as a whistleblower was more about revealing the attitudes and atmosphere on a drone base. Another cornerstone was discussing the very real battlefield trauma that drone operators are subjected to, even though they themselves can be thousands of miles away from the battlefield itself. Brandon's appearance on the BBC's Hard Talk was especially heartbreaking and gave listeners and viewers a glimpse into the ongoing struggle that drone operators face after being tasked with taking human lives for their country.

As a direct result of his traumatic experiences in service to the US military, Brandon has taken and maintained a vow of nonviolence. Sometimes he is prone to verbal outbursts which can be upsetting or unsettling for some. His YouTube videos occasionally contain language that can be disturbing or unflattering. For his part he maintains that he makes these video diaries as part of his therapeutic process, an attempt to vent off the fears and frustrations that bubble in his mind so that he can purge himself of negative thoughts and continue to heal and grow. Whatever conclusion one makes about Brandon's speech in his YouTube video diaries, an important consideration is that he never sent the video in question to the city council, instead his video was edited and appears to have been uploaded to a YouTube channel called "Pick Your Battles" without his permission to a channel that appears to not belong to him. It is quite clear and easily confirmable that it was not Brandon who sent the video in question to the City Council.

Our intention is to clear the air regarding the supposed threat presented by Brandon Bryant and bridge the gap that has been created between members of the city council and their constituents. While the contents of Brandon's video are not defensible, when watching the full, unedited version it is clear to us that this is not intended as a threat of physical violence, but a depiction of a spiritual struggle and a sincere call for political change. Moreover, Brandon suffers from PTSD and a Traumatic Brain Injury, both incurred during his service in the US Air Force, from which he was discharged honorably. It is clear to us that Brandon Bryant does not represent a threat to our safety. In other words, we as council members in no way feel that we are endangered by Mr. Bryant being released. Moreover, an unintended effect that his arrest and detention has on stifling citizen debate is measurable and regrettable as we know that this is simply an attempt to protect the elected officials of Missoula. As members of the Missoula City Council we wish to send a message in the strongest possible terms that the voices of the public are not only welcome at City Council meetings but required. Without an informed and engaged citizenry we are less able to function in our role as overseers of the city's affairs. We fully recognized and state that we are not speaking for the entire council and that our views on this matter are ours alone.

Being in the public eye and being decision makers in a community comes with great responsibility but it also has its downside. The council has many times been met with inappropriate verbal assaults during council meetings. Many of the constituents we represent face daily threats against them from folks in the community as part of their every day lives, such as our police officers, judges, attorneys, etc. They like us recognize that part of that comes with the job. We all believe in criminal justice reform and locking up a non-violent member of our community who is a military hero suffering from PTSD does not do our overcrowded jail or community any favors. We fully understood and supported Mr. Bryant's temporary barring from city council until all facts were realized but it is our belief that jailing a member of our community and subjecting him to the vicious revolving door of our criminal justice system is many steps too far. Mr. Bryant has no criminal history and is clearly working through personal struggles. It is our hope that he can find help through the mental health sector and not the prison system. In no way do we perceive him to be a threat to our safety or that of the community. We are firm believers in the 1<sup>st</sup> amendment and we deeply feel the future consequences of jailing an active citizen over a non violent offense will have devastating consequences.

Thank you for your time and please reach out with any thoughts, questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Council Members,

Jesse Ramos, Sandra Vasecka, and John Contos