John O. Pastore: Nagasaki mon amour

Harry Truman with Theodore Francis Green and then-Gov. John O. Pastore in Warren during a 1948 campaign swing through Rhode Island. JOURNAL FILE PHOTO

By John O. Pastore

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When I was 10 years old, and my father, John O. Pastore, was just beginning his long U.S. Senate career representing Rhode Island, I met Harry Truman in the Oval Office. The year was 1952, and Truman was toward the end of his turbulent presidency, but I was a child, so I just listened as he and my dad discussed politics.

Then Truman turned his attention to me, and it was clear that he knew how to talk to and delight young children. He had at the ready in his desk a number of mementos that had inscribed on them "I swiped this from Harry S. Truman." I thought he was great.

In later years, when Dad talked with me about the war and Truman, whom he admired greatly, he told me that the one thing he couldn't understand was the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. He thought the United States should have waited to let the horror of Hiroshima "sink in," as Dad put it.

I grew up reading a lot about these events, and I am aware of the military and political arguments on both sides for the atomic bombings, and especially about the controversy...
that surrounds Nagasaki.

But it wasn’t until I worked as a young physician in both Hiroshima and Nagasaki that I fully grasped the significance of Nagasaki, especially. The meaning is more moral than military.

By the time of the bombing on Aug. 9, 1945 -- 70 years ago tomorrow -- Nagasaki had long been the most Westernized of Japan’s cities, and most of Japan’s Christian minority lived in its environs.

On the morning of the atomic bombing, because of heavy cloud cover, the epicenter of the explosion was not the Mitsubishi munitions factory as intended, but the Urakami Cathedral, then the largest Catholic Church in Japan. It was also the most iconic, having been built in 1877 by the newly emboldened “Hidden Christians”, who in so doing announced their presence openly after long banishment.

The church has been rebuilt, but the heads of statues of the saints have been left on the ground where they fell, their blackened faces the only reminder of the horror that befell the churchgoers that morning.

Some events in history are so momentous and upsetting that searching for meaning in them is almost impossible.

But when I think of Truman, a very decent man, and of Nagasaki, one of history’s great tragedies, I am reminded that the reason to abolish nuclear weapons is a simple one: Even the best of our leaders cannot be trusted not to use them.

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