

The world has already seen 'fire and fury'



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Hearing President Trump threaten North Korea with "fire and fury" took me back some 23 years to an August morning at the Funairi Mutsumi Nursing Home in Hiroshima. There I sat across from 85-year-old Shima Sonoda, a frail woman whose words were carefully measured and whose emotions had long been contained. She was one of that ever-shrinking number of hibakusha — survivors of the A-bomb.

On that morning she told me of another August morning — that of Aug. 6, 1945 — when the bomb detonated overhead, and her city, her home and nearly everyone she knew were incinerated. Somehow she

survived, though buried under rubble.

In the moments after the blast she pawed through the debris that had been her home, searching for her 4-year-old daughter, Akiko Osato. There was nothing to be found of her, she told me — not then, not ever. Minutes before, her daughter had been in her arms asking for a can of tangerines that had been set aside as an emergency ration. But Sonoda had denied her daughter the tangerines, lest conditions — already dire — should worsen.

It was a day that she had almost never spoken of, though it was a constant part of her, as were the shards of glass she said were still embedded in her head. Each morning, even decades later, she would begin her day beside her small Buddhist altar and consecrate a can of tangerines to the memory of her daughter. As she spoke, she gently dabbed a tissue to catch the tears.

She is the first one I thought of upon hearing the president speak of “fire and fury,” like some cartoon god of war. Other memories too then came to mind — the island orphanage where children who lost both parents were taken in the days and weeks after the blast, where they had grown up, spent their entire adulthoods within its narrow confines and died, their bomb-induced keloids plainly visible, their deeper scars hidden away. I thought of the massive silver vats — cooled by, what was it, liquid nitrogen? — that held the DNA of numerous survivors, retained for future scientists whose more advanced techniques might decipher the long-term effects of radiation exposure denied to researchers of the present.

All this came to mind hearing the president’s threat to unleash the

unspeakable terror of nuclear weapons. He said it from the clubhouse of a Bedminster, N.J., golf course, a universe away from Hiroshima's skeletal dome, a testament to the unthinkable.

The president spoke of "fire and fury like the world has never seen." But the world has seen it. Sonoda saw it. So, too, did a couple hundred thousand other souls, nearly all civilians, whose everything was obliterated in an instant. And standing at the humble stone monument marking the exact spot 1,900 feet above which the sun itself seemed to detonate, the temperature rising to 5,000 degrees, unleashing cyclonic winds, I also felt the shiver that never leaves that place.

Trump: 'Fire and fury' comments on North Korea 'may not be tough enough'

President Trump on Aug. 10 said threats he made to North Korea two days earlier about facing the "fire and fury" of the U.S. "may not be tough enough." (The Washington Post)

It is a pity that Sonoda is no longer with us, that she cannot speak to the president and share with him her memories, tell him that there is no recovering from such devastation, that some things are not to be used for rhetorical ends, that they must, in the name of humanity, be placed beyond the gamesmanship of bullies.

Between Kim Jong Un's hermit kingdom, now bristling with missiles, and the U.S. coastline lies Japan, where Trump's words landed with singular impact and where Kim's missiles would find a likely target.

There was someone else who came to mind hearing the president's threats. His name is Lt. Col. Bernard T. Gallagher. He literally wrote the

book on nuclear weapons for the Air Force, flew for the Strategic Air Command and later ran the mountain redoubt in Virginia — Mount Weather it is called — where generations of presidents, justices of the Supreme Court, Cabinet secretaries and an entire shadow government were to take shelter for months, if need be — and still may — should Washington be erased by The Bomb.

In his final days in 2000, Bud, as he was known to his friends — and I would like to think I was among them — shared with me his thoughts of such weapons. Like Sonoda, he knew whereof he spoke. As a pilot and “cloud sampler,” he had flown through a dozen mushroom clouds. He had swallowed a radiation-sensitive plate, suspended by a string that hung from his mouth and that measured his exposure. He had witnessed the “fire and fury” close enough to feel the force of its winds, to see entire atolls overwhelmed and to know that this was something that must never, ever be used in war again.

I was with him within days of his final breath, and even then, at 78, he quoted the Bhagavad-Gita and the lines that came to him each time he saw the “fire and fury” of The Bomb, and forever after: “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.” I hear those words and the profanity of the president’s words, spoken at a golf course, their resounding ignorance of history sending shock waves out across the thinking world.