

GUEST OPINION: Thoughts on Poland tragedy by North Coast official

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Published: Friday, April 16, 2010 at 6:04 p.m.

Twenty years after democracy came to Poland, the tragic death of its president and a large part of its political and military leadership in a plane crash has tested that democratic system.

The tragedy is complicated by the fact that presidential elections were approaching, and two of the three nominated presidential candidates perished in the crash. The list of the casualties also includes several of the nation's highest military leaders, the president of its National Bank, the deputy speaker of Parliament, numerous Parliament members and prominent persons from all walks of Polish life.



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Nonetheless, I have little doubt that Poland will come through this tragedy stronger than ever.

Since 1990, when Lech Walesa was elected the first freely elected president of post-war Poland, the nation has come a long way.

I have been traveling to Poland regularly since 1980, and I have witnessed the changes firsthand. In 1983, I spent a summer there as a law student, during the worst days of martial law. Food was rationed, consumer goods were scarce and living conditions difficult. Moreover, Poles felt completely alienated from their government.

Beginning in 1991, I started visiting Poland as part of my work as a lawyer, observing the gradual transition of its legal system and the establishment of independent courts. Throughout that decade, I watched the nation steadily enter the Western sphere of influence, first with admission into NATO, then the European Union and most recently as part of our allied war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

I was appointed to represent the Polish government in San Francisco in 2004, and I travel there frequently now. The fundamental changes I've seen in this country are hard to overstate. The one constant is Poland's bond with the United States and its affinity to Americans.

At the moment, Poland's economy is among the strongest in Europe, having experienced growth of 5 percent of its gross national product for each of the past 10 years. Foreign investment is increasing rapidly. Many Silicon Valley companies such as Google and Intel have made Poland home for their research and development facilities, finding the country's large pool of engineers and educated work force very suitable to their needs.

Best of all, the country's own home-grown industries are beginning to compete in the world market. A large middle class has emerged and consumer spending is up. All of this in spite of a world recession.

Polish society has evolved nicely, too. The Polish population is one of the most highly literate in Europe, and the country's youth are largely English-speaking and college educated. Poland enjoys an unfettered free press and a vibrant cultural life. While it still is overwhelmingly Catholic, other religions are now thriving, and the society has become largely secular and tolerant of religious and ethnic minorities.

Most importantly, Poland's democratic institutions are strong. Elections are well-



fought but free in every respect. The country has three competitive political parties, which share representation in the Parliament.

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After the president's death, the speaker of the parliament became acting president and has taken steps to bring the country together. He has announced that a presidential election will take place in 60 days, as prescribed in the Polish constitution. Within days, the government has filled most of the key positions left open by the tragic deaths of its leaders only last Saturday.

Perhaps best of all, the Polish people have come together as a nation — as has been their tradition for a thousand years. The history of Poland is filled with invasions by its neighbors, brutal occupations and devastating wars; in every case, it has been an occasion for Polish courage and solidarity. Poland had the largest underground army in world history during World War II.

Inspired by Pope John Paul II, the Polish people 30 years ago started Solidarity, the first non-communist union behind the Iron Curtain. This movement first threatened and then helped topple the communist regime imposed by the Soviets. Now, the Polish people have rallied again, moved by the loss of their president and first lady, they have taken to the streets to express their love of country while reaffirming their democratic values.

The Polish national anthem begins with the words: "Jeszcze Polska nie zginela" — in English, this translates: "Poland has not perished."

Now, as the Polish nation mourns the tragic death of its president and many other national leaders, those words ring truer than ever.

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