ACADEMY OF ACHIEVEMENT

★ ★ ★ ESTABLISHED 1961 — A MUSEUM OF LIVING HISTORY — WASHINGTON D.C. ★ ★ ★

PATRIOT & PUBLIC SERVANT

"IT happens once, it's an accident; when you see the same thing twice, it's a trend; when you see three, it's a plan."

- Inducted: 2005 -

Interview: Norman Mineta
Former U.S. Secretary of Transportation

June 3, 2006

Los Angeles, California

Back to Norman Mineta Interview

(The Academy of Achievement interviewed Norman Mineta's boyhood friend, Senator Alan Simpson, on May 22, 1998 in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Senator Simpson's remarks on their friendship are also included in this transcript.)

Secretary Mineta, could you tell us what your childhood was like, growing up as the son of immigrant parents in San José before World War II?

Norman Mineta: Well, my dad had come as a 14-year-old from Japan in 1902, and he worked for Speckles Sugar Company down in Speckles, near Salinas, and then in about 1910, they moved him from Speckles in Salinas to San Martín, just south of San José, to set up a sugar beet operation there, and he did that. Then, in 1917, he was part of that influenza epidemic, maybe 1918, so he ended up in county hospital for six, seven months, and as a result of that, they said that he couldn't go back to farming, it

was too strenuous, so he moved into San José, doing a number of odd jobs. One of them, one day he was interpreting in court, and these fellows came up to him and said, "How would you like to go into the insurance business?" And he said, "Well, I know nothing about insurance." So they said, "We would train you." So actually, in 1920, he started in the insurance business. So that was the setting of the family in the early twenties. In 1928, he built a home in San José, and then I was the youngest of five children, and I was born in 1931. So for us, life was pretty idyllic. Every summer we had our vacations, Lake Tahoe, Santa Cruz, Crater Lake, Arizona, Grand Canyon, wherever. It was a family of seven, and it was just a strong family, and we just had a great time growing up.

Were there problems for you as a Japanese American family at that time?

Norman Mineta: Well, for example...

I remember my sister went to San José State and majored in education, and they said, "What are you doing majoring in education?" "I want to be a teacher." This is 1937. And they said, "No school district is going to hire a Japanese American." So she then changed to commerce -- to major in commerce -- which enabled her to become a secretary when she graduated from San José State in 1940. So yes to that extent, you find the traditional historical racial discrimination that was existent and prevailing, especially with Asian populations.

My oldest sister went to Berkeley in 1933, and my father used to always be asked by friends of his, "Why are you sending your daughter to Berkeley? She ought to either get married or go to work." And he would say, "No, they need a good education to prepare themselves for their future." This is from a person who had only an 8th grade education himself. So there are the traditional kinds of prejudices that all of us I think went through, but I think in San José in those days, it really was what I would call an integrated community. We were living as Americans of Japanese ancestry in an area that was predominantly of Italian

ancestry.

After December 7, and the evacuation orders came out, the San José Mercury News came out editorially and said, "Look, these are our friends, they are neighbors, so don't think of them as the people who were piloting the planes in Hawaii." Because there was that distinction that couldn't be made by many, many people, of those who were flying the airplanes on the 7th of December and those who were living in Washington, Oregon and California, who by accident of birth happened to be of Japanese ancestry. So all of that fury of December 7th, with historical racial discrimination, wartime hysteria and weak political leadership at that time then caused the forced evacuation and internment of those of Japanese ancestry.

Up until that time, what kind of a kid were you when you were growing up?

Norman Mineta: A good kid. When you are the youngest of five, and the next older above you is 10 years, you really get sort of treated as a caboose. There is no question that I was treated very specially by the family. There was a very well-known Japanese American pharmacist who had a drugstore right in Japan Town in San José. He used to refer to me as *Kuza*. A *kuza* is sort of a brat. I think of myself at that age as mischievous, as Alan Simpson said one time. I met Alan Simpson in 1943, so that friendship has been there for a long time. But in fourth and fifth grade, I was playing violin and playing baseball in the streets, and having a great time.

What interests did you have as a child?

Norman Mineta: Sports. I loved playing basketball and baseball, and pursued that in high school, as well. I also tried track, but couldn't do the 100 fast enough consistently

to be on the track team. In the meantime I had developed an interest in photography. We had a crew of photographers for our high school newspaper and yearbook, and we did all the photography for the newspaper and for the yearbook, except for the senior photos. So I became a photographer for the staff in my sophomore year at San José High School.

Were you a good student?

Norman Mineta: I think I did relatively well, but if I were to compare myself to today's young people, I am sure glad I went to Berkeley when I did, because I would never be able to compete with them today. They are so much more intelligent and sophisticated, much wiser in their ways. When I started in Berkeley as a freshman, I was literally wet behind the ears, because I started at the time when the last of the World War II vets were just starting to graduate. They had a real strong influence on how I was at Berkeley.

What or who influenced you or motivated you or challenged you as a kid growing up?

Norman Mineta: Without a doubt, it was my parents, and especially my dad. My dad, as I said, left Japan at the age of 14, and he had an uncle who was working for Speckles Sugar Company in Speckles, California, and so he had written to his brother saying, "You ought to send one of your kids over here to the United States to see what farming techniques are like." They were a farming family in

Japan.

My dad was the "number two" son, and everything goes to the "number one" son in Japan, so he decided he might as well go take a look. He said, "I didn't know that much about U.S. geography, so I got off the ship in Seattle." He was roughly 800 or 900 miles away from where he should be. It took him a year and a half to work from one lumber camp to a farm camp, from Seattle, all the way down to san José.

By the time he got to San José, he was 16 years old, and his uncle said, "You have got to learn English," so he put him in the first grade. Here he was, 16 years old. He said the most humiliating thing he ever had to do was to be put in the first grade at the age of 16. He said one of the problems was that some of those kids were as tall as he was, but it also makes you learn English very quickly.

I remember in his lifetime, I only saw him cry three times. Once was on the 7th of December, because he couldn't understand why the land of his birth had attacked the land of his heart. The second time was on the 29th of May, 1942, when we had boarded the train and we were coming out of San José on our way to go to Santa Anita, the race track in Southern California, and I saw him starting to cry the second time. The third time was 1956 when my mother passed away. So those are the only three times I ever saw my dad cry.

I came out of the service after the Korean War and joined him in the insurance business that he had started in 1920.

There was another person who was a very big influence in my life. It was a very close family friend by the name of I.K. Ishimatsu. Mr. Ishimatsu was a very successful lettuce grower, but he always said that one of the reasons why we were evacuated and interned was because we had no connection to the political world. So in 1946, people were returning to San José from camp. They had nothing, literally nothing, but yet he would go around collecting a dollar or 50 cents, whatever he could, and then he would

get the money to send two people to the Democratic Jackson Day dinner or two people to the Republican Party Lincoln dinner, and just to get exposure of young Japanese Americans into political connections.

By 1960, I became a beneficiary of one of those tickets, so I would say between my dad, my mother and Mr. Ishimatsu, and the firm hand of my three sisters and my brother, they were my influence.

Are there any books you remember, any films you remember?

Norman Mineta: When we were evacuated, we went to Santa Anita first, the race track.

What the Army had done was to commandeer all the race tracks and county fairgrounds in Washington, Oregon, and California, because they had built-in living quarters, namely, the horse stables. So we were in Santa Anita, but fortunately, by the time we got there, all the horse stables had been filled, so we lived in barracks buildings in the parking lot. And then, in October of '42, we were moved by train from Santa Anita to Heart Mountain, Wyoming, which is about 20 miles east of Cody.

When we got there in early November, the schools hadn't been built yet, and in the meantime, one of my sisters had gotten a job in Chicago. She would send me books, things like *Gulliver's Travels* and all the old Mark Twain stories and then she would write to me, asking me questions. That was the teacher coming out in her. She wanted to become a teacher, but ended up being a secretary. She would write these questions and I would have to write back to her about various books, but I remember *Gulliver's Travels* was the first book that I got when I was at camp.

My wife asked me about what was the first movie that I remember, and it was *Citizen Kane* with Orson Welles. I saw it in 1943, in camp, in Heart Mountain, Wyoming. One of these days I am going to get that movie and watch it again. As a 12-year-old, it really scared me. Even now, I can picture Orson Welles sitting at the end of that long table and also seeing Rosebud, the sled, catching

on fire in the fireplace. One of these days I will go back and view that film.

In the days after Pearl Harbor, how did you and your family find out that you were going to be taken from your homes and sent to an internment camp?

Norman Mineta: We had just returned from church. It was just after 12:00 noon, and the phone was ringing off the hook. My dad was a leader in the Japanese American community. People were wondering, "What's going to be the impact of this attack on Pearl Harbor?" People were starting to come over to the house, as well.

Next-door to our home was a home where the executive director of the Japanese Association of Santa Clara County lived. Now this was just a social organization, but about 1:30, their daughter Joyce came running in our back door. We had a hedge between our home, and we cut out a little hedge so that Irving or Joyce or I could go back and forth through that hedge to each other's homes. Joyce came running in about 1:30 saying, "The police are taking papa away! The police are taking papa away!" So my dad went running out of the house, next-door, but by that time the FBI had already taken Mr. Hirano away, and it was several months before they knew what had happened to Mr. Hirano. Well, my dad was a good friend of the city manager, chief of police, county sheriff, head of the FBI, so he would call them up and find out what's going on, and they said that, "We're picking up leaders in the Japanese American community, people who we suspect if -- in case the Japanese invaded the West Coast -- might have some proclivity to work with the invading troops." So in any event, a number of Japanese Americans, or Buddhist priests and others, were picked up on the 7th of December.

My dad's insurance office was in the front. When he designed the house, he built an office in the front of the house. So I would sit in the hallway, just outside the door into the office, listening to friends coming over or him talking on the phone about what was going on. Of course, that had a tremendous impact on me.

President Roosevelt then signed Executive Order 9066 on the 17th of February 1942, delegating to the Commanding General of the Western Military Command the power to evacuate and intern Japanese Americans. So what they did was to put up these big, big placards on the sides of buildings, the utility poles, and it said, "Attention: All those of Japanese ancestry, alien and non-alien." So already psychological warfare was being worked on us. We weren't even being considered citizens of the United States. We were "non-aliens" of the United States of America. I remember in March of '42, I saw my brother crying, and I was wondering what he was crying about. Well, he had a 1A Selective Service draft card: "Ready, fit, and able to serve." All of a sudden he got one day a 4C. Well, everyone knows what a 4F is, well his was 4C. What the Selective Service System had done was to send out new draft cards to all Japanese American males saying, "4C: Enemy Alien." So here was a kid who was born and raised in San José, he was a sophomore at San José State, and all of a sudden he is looking at his card with 4C on it.

So there was a great deal of consternation in the Japanese American community from Washington to California. After the evacuation orders came out, they said that they would only evacuate the people from the coastline to maybe 75 miles inland, that was Zone 1. So a lot of people moved from Zone 1 into Zone 2, but by about April of '42, they had declared everything to the Nevada border as Zone 1, so everyone in California, Oregon, and Washington got swept up in the evacuation order. They didn't include some of the far reaches of the east side of Washington and Oregon, but all of California was designated as Zone 1.

By April we had to get our typhoid shots, all the viruses -- chickenpox, smallpox -- all of those shots we had to get, and people had to sell everything, because they couldn't take but just what they could carry. I remember my dad had just purchased a 1941 Packard in November of '40, and he, I believe, paid about $1,100 for the car, and he sold it in March for about $400, just to get rid of the car. A lot of people... there were stories of people who would come along and say, "Well, that refrigerator, Mr. Suzuki, you can't take with you. I'll buy it for $5.00," or $10.00, whatever, and I remember there was a story about a woman who had

her things for sale. Someone came to buy her good china, and they said, "Well, we'll pay you $5.00," so she took them and just threw them to the floor and said, "I am not going to sell them for five and you are not going to get it," and had just, in anger, broken all of her dishes. There were many, many examples of that.

When it came to real property, we were very fortunate in Santa Clara County.

Back in 1892, there was the Chinese Exclusion Act, and then in 1924, the Oriental Exclusion Act, which said that no Asians -- or, as they were called, "Orientals" then, and I always say, "Orientals are rugs and Asians are people," but in those days, they said that "Orientals" could not become U.S. citizens, and California, Washington, and Oregon had a law saying, "If you can't become a U.S. citizen, then you can't own land," known as the Alien Land Law.

When my dad bought this land in 1928, to build a home, we had an attorney in San José by the name of J.B. Peckham. Mr. Peckham would put the land in his name, and when the oldest child became 21, he would then change the ownership to that land. So if you ever took a look at the property rolls in Santa Clara County, San Mateo County, San Benito, Santa Cruz County, Monterey County, you would see "J.B. Peckham, J.B. Peckham, J.B. Peckham," and you would go, "Wow, this guy is really rich, look at all the land he has owned!" He kept the land in his name for the Chinese, Filipino and Japanese people who couldn't become U.S. citizens. As their oldest children, natural-born citizens of the United States, turned 21, he would transfer the property to their name.

Fortunately, many of our properties were not escheated by the government in 1942, just because of what Mr. Peckham had done in the '20s and '30s. So when we got our evacuation orders, we rented our home to a professor at San José State, Dr. Lucy Lawson in the Speech and Drama Department. She and her mother lived in the home for the duration of World War II, and our properties were saved.

What was it like, as an 11-year-old boy, being uprooted and sent to Cody, Wyoming?

Norman Mineta: Well, for me originally, it was "Wow, I am going to be on an overnight train ride!" The first time for me. I remember when my mother took me up to see *Fantasia* in San Francisco, but here we were going to go on a really long train ride overnight from San José to Santa Anita. So as a kid, it really was much different than the impact on my dad. Towards the end of February 1941, he got his insurance license renewed. It was dated February 17th, but stamped across it was, "Suspended for the Duration of World War II." So his business ended at that point. The impact on our elders -- on my older sisters, my brother in college -- was tremendous. For me, an 11-year-old kid, it was a lot different. I remember the day we left San José, to board the train...

They had us all board at the freight yard, not at the passenger depot, but at the freight yard, which in a way had a good thing, because the freight yard was about five blocks from my grammar school, so a lot of the kids from the grammar school came to see us off. That day I was wearing my Cub Scout uniform, had a baseball, baseball glove, baseball bat, and so as I got on the train, then the MPs confiscated my bat on the basis it could be used as a lethal weapon. So they confiscated the bat and I got on the train with my baseball and baseball glove. And then all the shades were pulled on the train, and we had MPs at each end of the cars. Now, people would want to peek out, see where we were, and of course, that would just bring in a flash of light into the car, and the MPs would yell at us.

So it was a very different experience.

All of a sudden, here we are in Santa Anita, barbed wire enclosure, every 300 feet a military guard tower, searchlights, machine gun mounts. I remember, as a kid even, looking up at the guard tower thinking, "We were told we are in here for our protection. Well, if we are in here for our protection, why are the machine guns pointed in at us, and not out?" Then, those searchlights would go by, back and forth during the course of the night. We didn't have glass on the windows in the barracks. We had Isinglass. They had sort of diffused kind of plastic on wire. You could see the searchlight going back and forth. Even with your eyes closed, you could still see that searchlight going back and forth. Even if you put the blanket over your head, you still -- quote -- "saw" the searchlights going back and forth.

So we moved in May. We had no school, so we did what kids do to entertain themselves, played kick the can, played baseball, whatever, and then, in November we were moved from Santa Anita to Heart Mountain.

Senator Simpson, you remember those times in Wyoming. Can you tell us about that?

Alan Simpson: I don't think most Americans remember this, but Wyoming people sure do.

Suddenly in 1943, when I was 12, the third largest city in Wyoming sprung up in the sage brush, between Powell, Wyoming and Cody, Wyoming. Carpenters out there worked day and night, with lights on, building tarpaper shacks. And the carpenters were all 45, 50, 55 -- we thought they were ancient, but there they were. They were pretty adroit and they built a city. Suddenly, 11,000 Japanese Americans came in on the train. They were Americans who were gathered up in San José, and in the coast of California and taken to Santa Anita race track and put in the stalls and told that they could have one bag and that they were headed for Manzanar in Colorado, or Heart Mountain in Wyoming. And they were U.S. citizens, they were not aliens. Some were permanent

resident aliens, very few, I mean, maybe 10 percent. The rest of them were called U.S. citizens and they were all Japanese American. We didn't do that with the German Americans. We were fighting them, but we couldn't identify them, and we didn't do it with the Italian Americans, and we were fighting them, because we couldn't identify them. But we could identify our fine fellow Americans. It was a total racist operation.

There was great fear. Don't forget that the Attorney General of California who signed the order was Earl Warren, and don't forget that a Supreme Court Justice who upheld that act was Justice William O. Douglas. They spent the rest of their lives trying to atone for it. All their writings disclose the pain of what they did in that situation, but it was something they thought had to be done. We thought there were submarines off the coast. We thought people were signaling them in, and there was real fear.

Secretary Mineta, you were in the internment camp in Heart Mountain when you first met Alan Simpson. How did that come about?

Norman Mineta: The first thing we did when we got to Heart Mountain -- not "we," but our elders...

Somebody had written to the Boy Scouts of America and said, "Please send organizers to come and help us organize the Boy Scout troops." So we all became Boy Scouts, we had jamborees in the camp, and our Scout leaders decided to invite the Boy Scouts from outside the camp to come into the camp for the jamboree. But here we were in a barbed wire enclosure, guard towers, and so as our Scout leaders invited people in, they said, "We are not going to go in there, those are prisoners of war, we

are not going to go in there." At that point it was the third largest city in Wyoming, but they wouldn't allow anybody in the camp to register to vote, because of the implications of maybe swaying the elections one way or another. So in any event, we had our jamboree. Someone finally said, "Hey, hold it. These are Boy Scouts of America. They read the same manual you do, they wear the same uniform, they go after the same merit badges you do," and so finally, the Boy Scouts from Cody came in.

Senator Simpson, how were you introduced to the Scouts at Heart Mountain?

Alan Simpson: I was in Boy Scouts, and the Scoutmaster, he was sitting there one night and he said, "You know what we're going to do next week?" We were all tying our knots and looking around, so we said, "What are we going to do?"

He said, "We're going to go to the Jap camp." That was what it was called. It had guard towers, it had barbed wire, it had guards in the towers, and we said, "We're not going out there. We could be killed." He said, "No, no. You need to go." He was a Scoutmaster ahead of his time, and honestly, I can't remember his name. This was the tragedy, but anyway, we went to "the Jap camp" and here were these 12-year-olds, just like me with San José Scout Troop No. 24, and telling the same stories, reading the same stupid little horrible books. Telling the same jokes, speaking the same language. They didn't even know where Japan was. And there's where I met Norm Mineta, this pesky little rascal. And we laughed and tied knots and did some other devilish tricks. He says that we did more tricks than I imagine.

Secretary Mineta, what activities could you do as Scouts in this situation?

Norman Mineta: We had our knot-tying contests, how to start a fire without any matches, all of these kinds of things you do as a Boy Scout, carving contests with our knives.

We got paired off into pup tents, and of course, when you have a pup tent, especially like in Wyoming where it could rain anytime, you had to build a moat around your tent to protect it. So this other kid and I built a moat around it, and then all of a

sudden he said, "There is a kid from my troop in the tent right below us, and I don't really care for him that much, would you mind if we cut the water to exit that way?" I thought, "Well, no skin off my nose. Sure." So we did. We built our moat and we cut the water to exit that way, and as luck would have it, it started raining, and our moat worked perfectly, and the water drained off, tent pegs pulled on the tent down below us, tent came down, and this kid is in the tent going, "Hee-hee-hee! Ho-ho-ho! Ha-ha-ha!" Laughing. And I would say, "Alan, would you please shut up so we can get some sleep." It was Alan Simpson, who then eventually became the U.S. Senator, but through junior high school, high school and college, we wrote to each other, and developed a great friendship.

Senator Simpson, what was it like for you, meeting these interned Japanese Americans at Heart Mountain?

Alan Simpson: Here they were, living in tarpaper shacks. And all the people in there were people who were either over 50 or under 16, because the people 17 through 30 were in the U.S. military, in special units, like with Bob Dole. As a kid, it just didn't fit. Your mind couldn't run it up. Nobody spoke Japanese, very few. Their fathers were professors.

There was a sign on the door in the restaurant at Cody that said, "No Japs Allowed," and yet, the trustees would come into town from the camp and they were all wonderful people. Then some Cody kid would be killed on Guadalcanal, or somewhere in the South Pacific, and there'd be some racist thing on the window. Yet on the other side, the Japanese who were gone from the camp were serving in the U.S. Army. I never sorted that out.

There was a lawsuit that the people of America missed. They took about 19 of those kids who had been in the camp there for

about three years, and drafted them into the U.S. Army. And they refused to go until their people were turned loose from Heart Mountain. They went to the Federal District Court in Cheyenne. That's a wonderful story. You talk about some of the great trials, that one was a great one. They lost of course, and they all were drafted. They said, "Okay, we love America, we don't even know Japan, but let my mother and my little brother out of Heart Mountain." Somebody ought to do a story on that one.

Secretary Mineta, did you and Alan Simpson keep in touch as adults?

Norman Mineta: I graduated from Berkeley, had an ROTC commission, the Korean War was going on, went overseas, lost track of him, and then...

I was elected Mayor of San José, and Associated Press had a short story about me being elected. In the body of it, it said, "Mineta was one of 120,000 Japanese Americans evacuated and interned in camps during World War II. He and his family were at Heart Mountain, Wyoming." Well, The Cody Enterprise picked up on the story, printed it. Alan was practicing law in Cody. The next thing, I get a note, "Dear Norm, congratulations on being elected Mayor of San José. I have been wondering what the heck you'd been up to all these years." Well, in 1974, I got elected to the Congress, and in 1978, he got elected to the U.S. Senate, and our friendship went back together as if we were sitting in that pup tent in 1943.

Senator Simpson, how do you recall getting back in touch with Norman Mineta in later years?

Alan Simpson: Mineta goes off, becomes the Mayor of San José and I wrote him a letter. I said, "You remember the fat kid? Tying knots?" He said, "Oh, God..." and he wrote. Then we got to Congress together, and we were in the Congress together. A wonderful guy. And then we were on the Smithsonian Board of Regents together and now we're on the Smithsonian National Board. The only horrible part is that every time we see each other we just kiss each other and hug each other, and our wives

says, "God, there they are, doing it again." But it was a great adventure, and a powerful one, the most powerful of all.

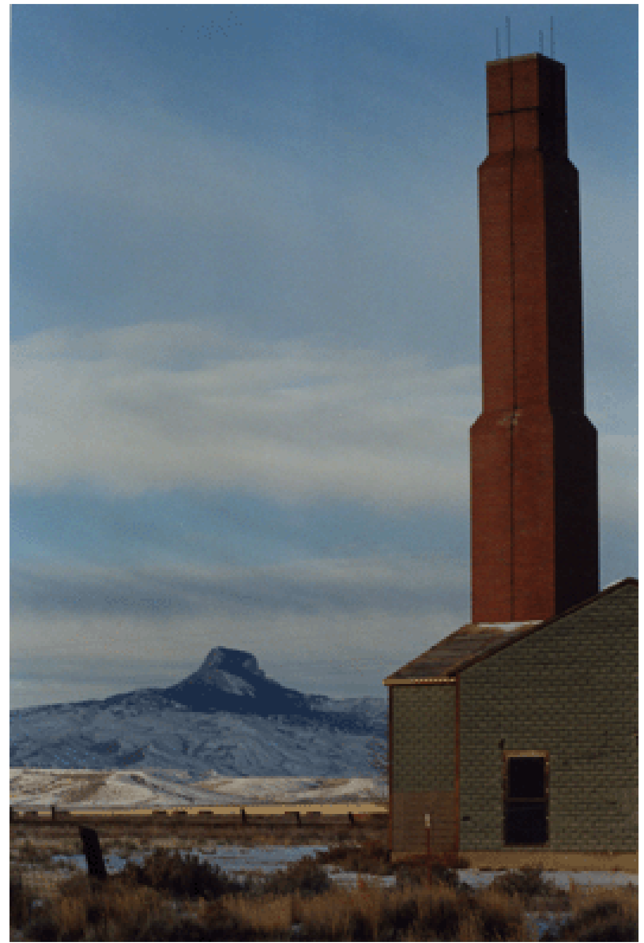
Secretary Mineta, in 1988, you and Senator Simpson worked together for reparations for Japanese Americans, didn't you?

Norman Mineta: Absolutely. Absolutely. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988.

The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) had passed a resolution in 1978 saying, "We will undertake a legislative program to seek redress for the evacuation/internment of those of Japanese ancestry, and redress of $25,000 per person." Well, at that point, there was Senator (Daniel) Inouye, Senator (Spark) Matsunaga from Hawaii, Congressman Bob Matsui and I from California. So we had this one-sentence resolution from the national Japanese American Citizens League convention, wondering "What are we going to do with this now?" So as we kept meeting among ourselves, and with the JACL, Dan said, "Look, until we educate our colleagues about this, we are not going to get anywhere." Now, there was the Warren Commission that talked about the Kennedy assassination. There was the Commission on the Kent State slaughter. So what we should do is to have a commission, because those were bestsellers, they were on television. In this way we would be able to get to the depths of why the evacuation and internment occurred. So in 1978, we then established a legislation called the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, and that group, with Thurgood Marshall as one of the members, studied the whole issue, and by 1980, they issued a report saying that the evacuation was due to wartime hysteria, historical racial discrimination, and weak political leadership.

I had a brilliant young legislative director by the name of Glenn Roberts. His brother Steve Roberts was with *The New York Times*. Glenn Roberts took the report from the Commission and translated

that into legislative language, and that became the Civil Liberties Act of 1980. President Reagan signed that legislation on August 10, 1988, so it became the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which had the operative words in there, and the Congress, on behalf of the nation, apologizes and pays redress of $20,000 per person for those who are now still living. I was very, very proud to be part of that legislative effort coordination. For our people to be able to admit to their own mistakes, and to come forward like that was very, very gratifying.



How did you get into politics? Did you know what you wanted to do with your life when you got out of college?

Norman Mineta: During World War II, my dad always felt that he wanted to do something towards the war effort, and so he ended up teaching at the University of Chicago under the Army Specialized Training Program, ASTP, teaching Japanese to U.S. Army personnel. He would give me those lesson plans, and I would say I didn't want anything to do with Japan during World War II. He said, "No, no, no, I want you to learn Japanese." So I did.

When we came back to San José in 1946, I completed high school and went to Berkeley. I started out in Aeronautical Engineering, but after I took calculus, I decided -- for the safety of the country and my own future -- I had better find something else to do. My dad always wanted me to be in the insurance business with him, so I changed course and finished in business.

You didn't set out to be a public servant?

Norman Mineta: No, but...

My dad had always encouraged all of us to be involved in community services. He said, "I don't care whether the outlet is church or Japanese American Citizens League, or wherever, but always pay back to the community." I started out in our Japanese Methodist Church. Eventually, that made me a representative to the Santa Clara County Council of Churches, and then in 1962, Governor Pat Brown appointed a young Japanese American lawyer in San José to the Municipal Court bench, the first Japanese American to be appointed to the Court, 1962. I was at Wayne Kanemoto's investiture and the Mayor of San José said, "Norm, Wayne has to resign from the Human Relations Commission. Would you consider going on the Human Relations Commission?" So I investigated what that was all about, and decided yes, I would.

Then I started the Housing Authority. In the meantime, I was active in the insurance business with my dad.

Then, in 1967, we had our first direct election of a Mayor of San José. One of the members of the City Council won that post, and so he said, "Would you consider putting your name in to fill the vacancy of my leaving the Council seat?" So I went to see my dad and I said, "There is a possibility I could be on the City Council," and he said, "You know, I always encouraged all of the kids to be in community service, but I really never expected that to lead to a political job." He said, "You know, there is an adage in Japanese: Where you are in politics, you are going to be like the nail sticking out on that board. And you know what happens to that nail? It always gets hammered." And I always say to papa, "Papa, you were so right." But he encouraged it, and so he did see me go on the City Council. He did see me elected Mayor of San José, but he never saw me elected to Congress.

Why do you think you were tapped to be on the Human Relations Commission? Why were you tapped to fill this seat on the City Council? What did people see in Norm Mineta?

Norman Mineta: I'm not sure. I was active. I always say I was sort of a community busybody. What happened on the Housing

Authority was...

We had an interstate highway come through San José -- 280. You know 280. It was coming through San José. They took about 1,700 homes, mostly Hispanic families, and in those days, they were paying maybe $50-55 a month rent. The going market rate for most homes were $160-175 a month rent, but all of a sudden, 1,700 families, that translated to about 10,000 people. So a number of us went to the City Council and said -- because Federal law doesn't say that if you are renting, you get housing assistance. If you own your business or residence, you get housing assistance. So a number of us went to the City Council and said, "Look, these people are being displaced, not of their own accord, so we think you ought to form a Housing Authority, take advantage of the Housing Act amendments of 1965, and handle the plight these people are in." The City Council said, "Okay, we'll do that, and then you five busybodies, who got us to do this, you are going to be the Housing Authority." So I was one of those five appointed at that time. Now that was 1966, and in 1967 was the mayor's election. So that's when I was asked to be interviewed, with a number of other people, for the City Council slot, and was appointed in '67 to fill that vacancy on the City Council.

An Asian American had never been elected mayor of a major American city.

Norman Mineta: Nor appointed. At that point, I would be the first. I was student body president of San José High School in 1949, four years after the end of the war, and people thought that was pretty amazing that that had occurred at that time. In real estate, they say, "Location, location, location." In politics, I guess it's timing, timing, timing. I

have been very, very fortunate over the years to be in the right place at the right time.

You went on to spend 20 years in Congress and to become a Cabinet Secretary in successive administrations of opposing parties. How do you explain your longevity in politics, not just getting elected, but staying in office?

Norman Mineta: Well, one of my interests has always been people, and I remember...

When I was in the House, people would always ask if I would consider running for the Senate, but you know, when you run for the Senate, first of all, you have got to just raise a lot of money, especially in a big state like California. But I have always felt that when you are in the House, you represent people, when you are in the Senate, you represent interests. And I was always more comfortable dealing with people than interests.

I have always tried to stay on the people side of issues. When I left Congress, I was in the private sector for five years, and then in that last year of a href="/autodoc/pagegen/brochure/p3.html" class="orangeLink2">President Clinton's term, I served as the Secretary of Commerce.

At the end of the Clinton administration, I figured, "Well, I will go into the private sector, or I will be doing something." And on the 29th of December, my stepson said, "Hey Norm, President-elect Bush says he is going to appoint a Democrat to the Cabinet. He hasn't appointed one yet. The Secretary of Transportation spot is open. Do you think he'll appoint you Secretary of Transportation?" I said, "Bob, what are you talking about? What have you been smoking or drinking?" That was about 10:30 in the morning. Then, about one o'clock, the phone rings. Bob was living with us at the time, so he answered the phone, and he said, "Yes, sir. He's standing right here." So he cups the phone. He says, "It's the Vice President." So I take the phone, and I go "Al?" He says, "No. This is Dick Cheney." I go, "Oh Dick, no! I am sorry." So then he says, "Well Norm, I am calling because we want you to come on board as Secretary of Transportation."

I said, "You have got to be kidding." He said, "No," and then we talked about it. I said, "Look, I really don't want to be diminished as a Democrat. I don't want to be considered a turncoat." We talked about that for a little while. He said, "Andy Card is going to call you." So I talked to Andy, and said, "Andy, I don't want to talk to you on the phone. I have got to talk to you eyeball to eyeball." I came into town and talked to him. Andy is an old friend, good friend. So I came home and I said to my wife Deni...

"Honey, this is what they are talking about." So she said, "You've got to talk to President Clinton and Vice President Gore. I said, "Yeah. Absolutely." So I called President Clinton. He said, "My inclination is you ought to do this." I said, "Well, I don't want to be diminished as a Democrat or thought of as a turncoat." He said, "No, no, no. We can give you cover on that. Don't worry about it." So anyway, then I talked to Vice President Gore, and he said, "Norm, I want to encourage you to do this." He said, "I didn't like the result of the election, I didn't like the Supreme Court decision, I am still chafing from this whole experience, but I want to encourage you to do this, because you can be part of the healing process." So the next day, Saturday and Sunday, I talked to over 100 people, including just about every African American member of Congress. African Americans had voted 12 to 1 against President Bush, and if I was in this position, these are all good friends of mine in key spots, I didn't want them pulling the rug out from under me. So I talked to every one of them, and they all said do it, and it was really Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton who put it in perspective. She said, "Norm, we can't slam President Bush for not having a Democrat in the Cabinet, and at the same time, dissuade every Democrat from going on the Cabinet." She said, "You know Transportation. You chaired the Transportation Committee in the House, you know it. You used to always tell us that there were no such things as Democratic bridges or Republican highways. You really ought to do this."

On the 1st of January, I called Vice President-elect Cheney. He was in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and I said, "I think I am ready to talk to you about this in more earnestness." Then, on the 2nd of January, Deni and I went down to Austin, Texas, and met

President-elect Bush for the first time. I went through an interview, and about an hour and a half into the interview, he said, "Well, Mr. Secretary, I would like to offer you the job as Secretary of Transportation in my new administration." Deni was sitting over here to the side. As a dutiful husband, I always look to her for advice. She goes like this (nods). So I said, "Mr. President-elect, it would be my honor to accept."

As a young boy, you experienced December 7, 1941, and then as Secretary of Transportation, you experienced September 11, 2001. Can you tell us about that day?

Norman Mineta: That morning I was having breakfast with the Vice Premier of Belgium, Isobel Durant, who was also the Minister of Transport, and Jane Garvey, the head of the Federal Aviation Administration, was also there at breakfast. So the three of us were having breakfast, and my Chief of Staff, John Flaherty, came in and said, "Mr. Secretary, may I see you?" So I excused myself, went into my office. At the other end of my office, I have a television set. Obviously, the World Trade Center, black smoke pouring out of there. I said, "What the heck is that?" He said, "Well, we don't know. We have heard 'explosion,' we've heard 'general aviation plane going into the building,' we've heard 'commercial airplane going into the building.' We don't know." So I said, "Well, I am going to go back into the breakfast, keep me posted." So I went in and explained to Jane and to Mrs. Durant what I had just been told. About six or seven minutes later, John came back in and said, "May I see you?" So I excused myself, went back in, and he said, "It has been confirmed. It was an American Airlines (plane) that went into the World Trade Center." I went up to the TV set to get a closer look, see if I could see the hole where the plane went in, and as I was watching the TV set, all of a sudden a gray object comes from the right side of the screen, comes across, sort of disappears, and then a yellow and white billowy cloud over here, and I go, "Holy Cow, what the heck was that."

I ran back into the conference room and said, "I don't know what is going on in New York, but Mrs. Durant, I have got to excuse myself. Jane, you have got to get back to the Operations Center over at FAA." I excused myself, came back into the office. By

that time, the White House had called and said I had to get over there right away.

I grabbed some manuals and some papers, went down to the car, and we went over to the White House. As we went in West Executive Drive, people pouring out of the Executive Office building, people running out of the White House, and I said to my driver and security guy, "Is there something wrong with this picture? We are driving in, and everybody else is running away." So I went into the White House and someone said, "You have to be briefed by Dick Clark in the Situation Room." So I went in there, he talked to me for four or five minutes, and he said, "You have got to go to the PEOC." I said, "What's the PEOC?" He said, "That's the Presidential Emergency Operations Center." I said, "I don't know where that is or what it is." There was a Secret Service agent standing there, says, "I will take you." Well, it's that bunker that's way under the White House.

I got to the PEOC and the Vice President was already there. Big conference table, and there are phones all along here. I took a phone and called my office, kept it an open line, and then I took another phone, called FAA -- Federal Aviation Administration Operations Center -- and kept it at open line and kept working the two phones.

Some young man came in and said to the Vice President, "There's a plane 50 miles out coming towards D.C." So I said to Monty Belger, who is the No. 2 at FAA, I said, "Monty, what do you have on radar on this plane coming in?" He said, "Well, the transponder has been turned off, so we don't know who it is, and we don't know the altitude or speed." I said, "Well, where is it?" He said, "It's somewhere beyond Great Falls right now." Then, the young man came in and said it's 20 miles away. I'd say, "Well, Monty, where is this plane in relationship to the ground?" On radar it is hard to associate with a ground point, but they'd be able to tell you roughly the distance from wherever you are, but he couldn't tell you the speed or altitude, and then all of a sudden, as I was talking to him, he said, "Oh, I lost the bogie. Lost the target." I said, "Well, where is it?" He said, "Well, it's somewhere between Rosslyn and National Airport," and about that time someone broke into the conversation and said, "Mr. Secretary, we

just had a confirmation from an Arlington County police officer saying that he saw an American Airlines plane go into the Pentagon." So then I said, "Monty, bring all the airplanes down." When you see one of something happen, it's an accident; when you see two of the same thing happening, it's a trend, something. When you see three, it's a plan. So I said, "Bring all the planes down."

You mean ground all the planes?

Norman Mineta: Ground all the planes. We already had a ground hold on planes going into New York. Any plane that was going to leave from Atlanta heading to New York, those planes were left on the ground in Atlanta. That happened maybe about 8:30 or 8:40 in the morning. Now this is about 9:27.

I said, "Bring all the planes down." Well, at that point, we had 4,638 airplanes in the air. With the skill of the air traffic controllers and the skill of the airplane pilots and the flight cabin crew, getting all the passengers prepared, they brought all those planes down in two hours and 20 minutes. It was really the skill of everybody just bringing those airplanes down. Now, he said, "We will bring the planes down per pilot discretion," and I said, "Screw pilot discretion," because I didn't want a pilot who was over Kansas City thinking, "Well, I will fly on to LA, sleep in my own bed tonight," because I wanted all those airplanes down. We had, at that point, seven to ten airplanes still unaccounted for from the airlines, and so I wanted to get all those airplanes down. I didn't want that pilot in Kansas making his own decision. I said, "Bring them all down."

So Monty said, "We will get them all down," and about 10:30, quarter to 11:00...

I called David Collenette, the Minister of Transport for Canada, and I said, "David, I need your help," and he said, "Well, I am watching everything on television, what is it you want me to do?" I said, "I have got these planes coming in from Asia and from Europe," and I said, "We are not going to take those. I am wondering if you could take those in Canada." So he said, "Okay." It

was amazing. I mean whether it's Halifax, Gander, wherever, they took all those planes, and the end of September, Minister Collenette came down and he gave me a picture of Halifax, and there you had something like 53 wide-body airplanes, wingtip to wingtip, at that small airport in Halifax, and the people in Halifax just opened up their homes, invited people in. Because that was Tuesday, and they all stayed there until Saturday, and so everyone cooperated, every which way.

Was September 11 your toughest day as a public official?

Norman Mineta: No question it was.

On the next day, we had a Cabinet meeting, and Congressman David Bonior of Michigan said, "Mr. President, we have a very large Arab American population in the Detroit area, and they are very concerned about what is going to be happening, and they are afraid of racial profiling," and the President said, "David, you are absolutely correct, and we don't want happening to them what happened to Norm in 1942. On that following Monday, the 17th of September, he had a meeting with Arab American and Muslim leaders at the Islamic mosque and study center in Washington, D.C., in which he said, "We know who the terrorists are. They are not you as loyal American citizens or as faithful followers of the Muslim religion, so don't worry about racial profiling."

Towards the end of September, there was a shooting at a gas station mini-mart in Arizona. The owner was shot and killed. He was a South Asian American -- Indian -- he was a Sikh, he had a turban. When they apprehended the murderer, they said, "Why did you shoot him?" He said, "Because he looked like the enemy." When the President called in leaders from the South Asian Indian community, and Sikh leaders, he said, "We are going to pursue any hate crime." The

Congress had already passed the Transportation Security Act, setting up the new Transportation Security Administration. In February, I announced the "no racial profiling" rule. That whole time period following September 11 was just a pressure cooker, trying to come up with the right public policy on security and transportation policy.

Could you have imagined, as a Japanese American boy growing up in San José, or interned at Heart Mountain, that one day you would be a City Council member, you would be a mayor, you would be a congressman, you would be a member of two presidential cabinets? Could you have imagined this?

Norman Mineta: Not at all, but I think one of the things that I have been taught by my dad was "Plan your work, and work your plan." The other part of it was, "Always work hard at the job you are at. "

One of the things about people in politics is that they get their sights set when they are at this point of where they want to be at some point in the future, and they start making decisions here on how they think that will be helpful to get them to this point -- here. The problem is, they generally will trip over something right in front of them because they have their sights set on something way over here, and that is something I haven't done. I have always worked hard at the job I'm at, and then really you are in control, because if an opportunity comes up, then you are in control of saying "Yes, I want to do this," or "No, I don't want to go this direction." But if you have already planned your steps on what you are going to do and how you are going to get there, then you are on somebody else's time scale and somebody else's track, and you are just moving about trying to adjust based on what you think will get you to the next step. So one of the things, as I reflect back, is I've always worked hard at the job I am at, and that will always open up opportunities for the future, and rather than being set like a robot to get somewhere in a certain time period.

What does it take to achieve, not just in your field, but any field? What do you think the important characteristics

are to achieve something in this world?

Norman Mineta: I think, without a doubt, integrity has to be number one. You have to be true to yourself and do the right thing. You are also going to round the corners in doing the right thing, and there are ways of being able to do that without sacrificing the basic principles and the foundation that gives character to an individual.

Whether it is $17 million or $12 million, you can compromise on that, but there are certain things where they say, "We want you to work on this subject matter," and I have to say, "No, I can't, because it's something I don't really believe in." I have been fortunate enough, in the Clinton administration and especially with the Bush administration, where they have asked me to do certain things, and if it's something that I am not comfortable doing, they will say, "Okay." One of the best things for me, the great relationship I have had with the President, is that I don't have to do anything in term of fundraising and politics. I am the envy of other members of the Cabinet, because I don't have to go out and raise funds for the party or the candidates. They really envy me for being in that position.

When young people come to you seeking advice, what do you say?

Norman Mineta: There is a great big world out there, with a lot of opportunities for them to really pursue their own dreams. The other part of it is...

No matter where you go or what you do, always pay back to the community in some form. Now, people don't have to be elected

to be in community service or in public service. To me, you could be well read, you could be a voter, but to do public service is an important facet, and so if a person is an M.D., they can still serve as a member of the Health Commission for a city or a county. They can still be doing, being a Planning Commissioner, Recreation Commissioner, whatever, because mayors and county commissions and governors and presidents are always looking for people who are willing to devote some time to public service and take their own background, their own expertise, and share that with the community.

Looking ahead into the 21st century, what do you think are the problems most important for us to solve in America?

Norman Mineta: I think the biggest challenges are still regarding health and education. I think back to my dad sending my sister off to Berkeley in 1933. When you think about a young woman going off to college in 1933, he just felt that whether being a woman or being of Japanese American ancestry, education is still a foundation for your own future. If you don't have good health, you can't pursue your educational pursuit either. I don't know a thing about it other than what I read, but when I think about the HIV-AIDS catastrophe, it seems to me that's something that we have got to be really working at in terms of the future of mankind.

How would you like to be remembered: What would you want your legacy to be?

Norman Mineta: That he got things done for people.

Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Thank you very much.

This page last revised on Oct 22, 2006 17:19 PDT