

California Pioneers of Santa Clara County

Essay Contest

2019

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Norman Yoshio
Mineta: Transcending
Limits
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Norman Yoshio Mineta was a great man who took charge and led the way forwards even when there was no light at the end of the tunnel. “Norm” Mineta was a transcendent man, the only Democratic Cabinet Secretary in the Bush administration, the longest-serving Transportation Secretary, eleven consecutive terms in the House of Representatives (1975-1995), and the first Asian-American to hold a post in the presidential cabinet. A strong leader who could hold under pressure, Norman was the man who grounded all planes in the aftermath of the devastating attacks on September 11, 2001. The Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International Airport is named after Mr. Mineta. Norman Mineta’s experience in internment camps as a youth was one of the reasons that he did not allow racial screenings on Muslims-Americans during the

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aftermath of 9/11. He felt that the human rights that were taken away from him should not be taken away from others. In 1999, Norman Mineta was awarded the L. Welch Pogue Award for Lifetime Achievement in Aviation because he was such a great leader in the transportation industry. He was also awarded the Tony Jannus Award in 2004 for “outstanding individual achievement in scheduled commercial aviation by airline executives, inventors and manufacturers, and government leaders.” He was also awarded the honorable Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2006, the highest civilian award in the United States. In addition, the honorable distinction of the Grand Cordon, Order of the Rising Sun in 2007 and the Distinguished Medal of Honor for Lifetime Achievement and Public service from the Japanese American Nation Museum in 2012. Norman Yoshio Mineta was a great leader who represented a whole other class of people, those that cared. The life of “Norm” Mineta is one that can be represented by one word, and that word is excellence; excellence in everything he did.

Norman Yoshio Mineta was born on November 12, 1931, in San Jose. He was a Nisei, a second-generation Japanese, his parents were born in Japan and moved to the United States. Norman was the youngest of five children of Kunisaku and Kane Mineta. His father had emigrated to the United States as a teenager in 1902, and the bride came in 1912. His father moved from Seattle to San Jose and found work operating a successful insurance agency. When World War Two started, Norman and his entire family were forcibly relocated to the Santa Anita racetrack near Los Angeles. At the racetrack, they were subject to horrible conditions and were forced to live in horse stalls, one per family. They left these horrible conditions and were relocated to the desolate Heart Mountain camp in Wyoming, in November 1942. In an interesting

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turn of events, Norman, a Boy Scout, crossed paths with a visiting group of Boy Scouts that included Alan K. Simpson, the future Senator from Wyoming someone that he would become good friends with while in Congress despite belonging to opposite parties. In 1943 his father volunteered for a program in Chicago in order to teach Japanese in a specialized training program for soldiers. Norman and his mother traveled to Chicago later that year. After the war ended, Norman returned to his birthplace, San Jose.

When Norman and his family was allowed to return to San Jose in 1946, his father was able to restart his insurance business. Also, they were one of the lucky few that managed to keep their home because an attorney had held it for them throughout the duration of the war. Mineta then attended San Jose High School where he was elected the president of the student body. He graduated from high school in 1949. Norman then went to the University of California Berkeley and graduated in 1952 with a major in business. Norman had participated in the Reserve Officers Training Program and served as an intelligence officer in the US Army during the Korean War in Japan. He served from 1953 to 1956, past when the war had ended. After he had finished his service, "Norm" returned to work in his family business. Norman's father encouraged him to be involved in community activities and service. This encouragement led him to become involved

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in organizations such as the Japanese Americans Citizens League (JACL) and the local Japanese American Methodist Church. With the encouragement of friends and family, Mineta became influenced by civic involvement. He was appointed to the San Jose Human Relations Commission in 1962 and was then appointed to the Housing Authority Board in 1966, four years later. However, in 1967, Norman joined the San Jose City Council as the first non-white member. Later in 1971, Norman was elected as the first Asian American to become mayor of a major city out of a large crowd of 15 contenders, his hometown of San Jose. While serving in the local government Mineta advocated for the rapidly expanding technology industry. He also worked to help new industries and increase job growth. He also supported the development of infrastructure in order to accommodate the industry and its enormous growth.

In 1975, Norman became the first Asian American member of Congress elected from the 48 contiguous states. Norman was elected over ten times and served twenty-one years in Congress until he resigned in 1995. From the 94th Congress all the way to the 104th Congress, “Norm” served with great distinction. Norman was a Republican early on in his life because the Democrats led by Franklin Delano Roosevelt misguidedly put them into the horrible internment camps. However, he later became frustrated with the Republican party’s approach to different social issues of the time and joined the Democratic party. Mineta was elected to California 13th District, a Republican-leaning district at the time. However, Mineta’s popularity in local government allowed him to win the election comfortably. Over the next twenty-one years, he

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sponsored or co-sponsored over 479 bills. He was an instrumental part in passing the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1991 and the Intermodal Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991. During his first term, the Democratic leadership gave him a spot on the Public Works and Transportation Committee. In the 103rd Congress (1993-1995), he served as the chairman. Mineta also was a member of the Post Office and Civil Service Committee. However, he left to the Budget Committee, the committee where he would spend his next six years, from 1977 to 1983. During his second term, Mineta was appointed by the Speaker Tip O'Neill to the secretive Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence until he left in 1985. Starting in 1983, as a representative of the rapidly growing Silicon Valley area, Norman spent a decade on the Science and Technology Committee, renamed later on to the Science, Space, and Technology Committee. He stepped down from the committee to take the gavel and become chairperson of the Public Works Committee. Mineta entered Congress with the rest of his generation which was on average fifteen years younger than the current membership. Mineta's generation grew up during the time of the Watergate scandal and dishonesty. Because of this, his generation put large value into accountability and accessibility. During their first month, congresspeople like Norman redefined Congress and what it was like. They helped to remove three powerful committee chairs, reduced the power of other chairpeople, and reduced the power of the influential Ways and Means Committee. In June, Mineta was elected president of the freshman class of Democrats for a term. He was elected because his freshmen class hoped that he could organize them into an effective voting bloc that had power. As the leader of the freshman class, Mineta thought of a six-point plan that would use the energy of the restless new representatives. Almost every part of

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the plan sought to activate the rank and file members of the House. Mineta asked the Democratic leadership for fact-finding meetings with experts on policy. He also called for numerous meetings between the Democratic leadership and freshman officers. In addition, he asked for stricter oversight of the various activities that committees undertook, a commitment to the development of policy in the Democratic Caucus, and the publication of a newsletter by freshmen. Mineta felt that Congress had to show power in a way that showed that it was an equal branch of the government. During his service, he helped to manage expectations and serve as a liaison between older and younger generations in Congress. Many freshmen wanted to remove the Oklahomian Carl Albert from the speakership of the House, but Mineta was one of the few new Democrats from California that wanted to keep the current speaker. Mineta's commitment to Albert was strengthened by a relationship that dated to the 1950s. When Carl Albert retired, Mineta was one of the first people to endorse Tip O'Neill for the speakership. However, he still believed that the long-standing leadership of the House had created a system where the rank and file members were out of touch with the leaders. Mineta was an active member of the Public Works and Transportation Committee and its subcommittees. He was a member of the Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds during the 95th Congress (1977-1979), the Subcommittee on Oversight and Review during the 96th Congress (1979-1981), the Subcommittee on Aviation during the 97th-100th Congresses (1981-1989), and the Subcommittee on Surface Transportation during the 101st-102nd Congresses (1991-1995). In addition to all his work on the Public Works Committee, Mineta became chairperson of Budget's Task Force on the Budget Process. This gave him a powerful oversight over money was spent.

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During 1979, Mineta was a part of a group of California Democrats who wanted to know why they had not received preferred committee assignments. Later during the year, Mineta was named as a possible candidate for Secretary of Transportation. By 1980, he was named as either chairman of the Budget Committee or the Democratic Whip. Many people admired Mineta greatly and thought of him as a future prospect for Speaker of the House. Rather than Whip, Mineta was appointed as Deputy Whip-at-large during the 97th Congress. In late 1980, Speaker Tip O'Neill appointed Mineta to the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee where he helped to decide the House's legislative agenda. Over his time on the Budget Committee, Mineta was given a birds-eye-view on the budgeting process of the United States government. He was also a powerful vote on the House floor, his vote could sway numerous representatives for or against a bill. Although Mineta was present everywhere during his tenure in the House, his main contributions were in the Public Works and Transportation Committee. The committee was, in reality, a very powerful body where they could create new projects such as roads, federal buildings, and airports creating a fresh stream of jobs for a congressional district and state. As the chairman of the subcommittee on Aviation for eight years, he worked to ensure that the commercial airline industry would remain safe and viable in the long run. Mineta also worked to make sure the Federal Aviation Administration would have the resources necessary in order to protect America's airplanes, passengers, and airports. Mineta also used his expertise on the budget process to pass many bills for aviation. He helped pass the Airport Development Authorization Act which gave \$450 million for improved and new airports. He also helped add the Airport and Airway Improvement Act to the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of

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1982. The act helped to provide nearly \$20 billion from an industry trust in order to limit congestion and delays at airports. During his tenure on the Aviation Subcommittee, Mineta helped to pass over two dozen bills that provide much-needed funds to American's aviation industry and airports. When Norman took the gavel of the Subcommittee on Surface Transportation during the 101st Congress, the future of America's roads was his most immediate issue. During the "post-Interstate period" issues such as high-speed transportation corridors, sanitary food, pipeline safety, and hazardous waste transportation were his main concerns. When the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed, Mineta helped to include transportation protections for those with disabilities. In addition, Mineta helped to pass the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act in 1991. The law helped to give local and state governments more control over the roads that were located in their jurisdiction. The act also authorized over \$151 billion over six years. It also helped to set the foundation for the NHS (National Highway System) by combining the interstates with other federally funded roadways. Mineta then used all his experience and his policy expertise to take over the gavel of the Public Works and Transportation Committee in the 103rd Congress. The Public Works and Transportation Committee's jurisdiction was enormous, it covered issues from public buildings, dams, bridges, roads, and flood control. It covered everything from the Smithsonian Zoo to the Hoover Dam to San Jose Norman Y. Mineta International Airport. Later in his tenure, Mineta was involved in a fight over appropriations regarding several highway projects. The chairman of the Appropriations Committee had authorized funding for different highway projects without the approval of the committee that had jurisdiction over such issues. Overall, Mineta won the fight

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by gaining more jurisdiction and forcing the bill back to committee. After Mineta created the National Highway System, his committee wanted to add almost 300 roads and transit programs from different members. In mid-May of 1994, he debuted a \$2 billion bill. In just one example of how popular Mineta and his committee was, the bill was passed in two weeks with an overwhelming majority of 400 votes. However, the Senate did not have similar feelings about the bills and within weeks, talks had stalled. Outside of the committee Mineta also worked on other issue. One such issue was the internment of the Japanese-Americans during World War Two. During the late 1970s, Mineta helped to pass a bill that would credit the time internees spent in the camp towards their civil service retirement benefits. He also helped to organize a group of Congressman such as Daniel Inouye, Spark Matsunaga, and Robert Matsui to pass a bill the studied the internment and relocation of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War. Using the results of the study, Mineta again helped to pass a bill that authorized the federal government to pay \$20,000 for every surviving internee, a total sum of \$1.2 billion. The government would also issue a formal apology for illegally interning the Americans, clear Justice Department criminal records from interment, and give millions for public education initiatives. Mineta also helped to co-found the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus. After the 1994 election, when the Republicans finally took control of the House, Mineta retired from the House of Representatives on October 10, 1995. He then remained away from the public eye for some time then returned to the private sector.

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After his retirement from the House of Representatives, Mineta entered the private sector for work. His first position was as the vice president of Lockheed Martin, a major aerospace and defense contractor. He also was appointed as chairman of the National Civil Aviation Review Commission. The report released in 1997 issued reports on how to reduce air traffic congestions and minimize the risk of aircraft accidents. After his short time in the private sector, former President Bill Clinton appointed Mineta as the Secretary of Commerce in June of 2000, when William Daley left to coordinate Al Gore's presidential campaign. The appointment of Mineta as

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Commerce Secretary made him the first Asian-American Cabinet Member. As the Secretary of Commerce, Mineta was known for his work on issues relating to technology. He also achieved international cooperation and intergovernmental coordination on complex issues relating to the fishing industry. He also helped to smoothen the patent and trademark process. He held the position in the commerce department for six months until George W. Bush's presidency took hold. George W. Bush then appointed him as the Transportation Secretary, a position that he would hold for six years, a record that he set and still holds to this day. Mineta ensured that the field of transportation would remain nonpartisan and that he would not be Democratic or Republican. He was quoted as saying, "There are no Democratic or Republican highways, no such thing as a Republican or Democratic traffic congestions." Mineta was Secretary of Transportation during the horrifying attacks on America on September 11, 2001. He was the one who order all commercial aircraft out of the skies on that fateful day. In the aftermath of the attack he ordered all airports not to discriminate against Middle Eastern or Arabic passengers as not to have them undergo an experience similar to the internment camps that he experienced. Over the next year, he helped to create the TSA (Transportation Security Administration). The creation of the administration was the largest mobilization of an agency since World War Two with 65,000 employees. The administration was placed under the jurisdiction of the Department of Transportation until it was moved to the Department of Homeland Security in 2003. As Secretary of Transportation, he helped deal with the struggling airline industry and rail service Amtrak. In December of 2004, he unveiled the Next Generation Air Transportation System plan, which was a collaboration of six federal agencies to "lead the transformation of America's air

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transportation network.” Mineta resigned in 2006 after serving for over five years in the Department. After his resignation Mineta received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor a civilian can receive from the government in the United States. After he left his post in the Cabinet, Mineta joined the board of the Hill and Knowlton, a Washington-based strategic global planning firm. He then joined L & L Energy, Inc. as its vice chairman of the board. However, after his retirement, Norman never did anything large and largely stepped away from the public eye except for some volunteering and speeches here and there. Overall, Norman Yoshio Mineta was an amazing man who had such an amazing benefit for America. A humble little Japanese boy from Santa Clara County grew up to be one of America’s most prominent political figures. It just shows that you can really do anything and be anything in America, as long as you are hardworking, like “Norm”.

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