the ladder of success

PROFILE OF NORM MINETA, FORMER SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION, SECRETARY OF COMMERCE, MEMBER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, & MAYOR OF SAN JOSE

Interview location: Secretary Mineta's home in Edgewater, MD, and at Carrol's Creek Café in Annapolis
How we got there: by car
He describes himself with the word, "Vision," for which there is no direct translation in Japanese.



President Obama and Norm Mineta. (Photo used with permission from Mineta photo archives.)

The searchlights were going back and forth over his body, scanning the barracks as Norm Mineta slept. It was the middle of 1942, and Norm was ten years old, sleeping on a mattress stuffed with hay in the parking lot of Santa Anita Racetrack in California. Barbed wire wrapped around the compound, and guns stuck out of military guard towers every couple hundred feet. "Even if you pulled the blanket and covers over you, you could still imagine those searchlights going back and forth," recalls Norm. "You couldn't see it but you sensed it." ›

a seminal moment

The former Secretary of Transportation, whose parents were first-generation Japanese immigrants known as *issei*, is telling me the story of his family's internment. We are sitting at the kitchen table in his home in Edgewater, Maryland. Talking about the searchlights he waves his hand over the table back and forth, as if petting an imaginary cat. "To this day I still think about that," he says, looking out the window to the South River, a tributary of the Chesapeake Bay.

He calls the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 "the seminal moment of my life." His family had just returned from Sunday's church service to their home in San Jose, California, when they heard about the attack. Their phone was ringing off the hook. Rumor was that the American government was going to arrest all the *isseis*. Norm's father was a prominent insurance salesman, a well-liked businessman, and community leader. Neighbors were worried that the Minetas might get confused with the enemy. "It was the first time I ever saw my father cry," recalls Norm. "He said, 'I can't understand why the land of my birth attacked the land of my heart.'"

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt



Norman Mineta

signed Executive Order 9066, delegating to the Secretary of War the power to evacuate and intern people who might threaten American security. In California, Oregon, and Washington, the American government rounded up 120,000 people of Japanese descent and shipped them to internment camps for the duration of World War II. On May 29, 1942, Norm's family had to leave their home.

They were allowed to take what they could carry. At the freight station in San Jose, Norm was wearing his Cub Scout uniform, carrying a baseball, glove and bat. "For a ten-year-old kid, it was, 'Oh boy! An overnight train trip,'" recalls Norm. "That was the second time I saw my dad cry." The novelty of the train wore off as soon as Norm tried to board, when a military policeman confiscated his baseball bat. Bursting into tears, Norm ran to his father, who assured him, "It's okay, we'll get it replaced."

When they got to Santa Anita Racetrack the next day, all the stables were full. “Thank heavens we were in the newly built barracks in the parking lot,” says Norm, clarifying that on hot days, the stench in horse stables was unbearable. Still, he had to shower in the paddocks—a memory that he tempers with humor. “We’d say, ‘Which one do we want today? Seabiscuit or War Admiral?’”

> *I can’t understand why the land of my birth attacked the land of my heart.*

In November 1942, Norm’s family left the racetrack for a camp in Heart Mountain, Wyoming. “Getting off the train, the wind was blowing and colder than the devil,” says Norm. “Sand was peppering our faces. The sagebrush was just rolling along in the desert plain. Being Californians, we didn’t have heavy jackets. We were freezing our buns.” What Norm missed most was his baseball bat.

Fast-forward five decades, to one day in 1991, when Norm was a Member of Congress representing California’s 13th District, and a box was delivered to his office. Inside was a baseball bat signed by the Home Run King of the United States, Hank Aaron, and his counterpart in Japan, Sadaharu Oh. The gift came from a man in California who’d read Norm’s story. “I was so touched by the fact that you lost that bat getting on the train going to camp,” wrote the man. “That bat’s probably been replaced many times over, but I’d like you to have this one from my own collection.”

Soon the thoughtful gesture appeared in the San Jose Mercury News, where the reporter disclosed the value of the autographed bat at $1500. “The gift limitation for members of congress was 250 dollars,” explains Norm, shaking his head. “So I had to pack up the bat and send it back to the guy with a letter thanking him for his generosity but that I can’t accept it.” Then he sent a copy of the letter to the reporter with a short personal note scribbled in the upper right hand corner: *The damn government’s taken my bat again.*

The gifted bat now hangs in Norm’s home office, mounted in a glass case on the wall above the bookshelf. When he retired from Congress in 1995, the fellow in California resent the gift. “I’ll show it to you,” he says, and I follow him into the office.



Norman Mineta’s famous baseball bat, hanging in his office. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach).

As I'm scanning the shelves underneath the bat, one item in particular—an aerosol can—catches my eye. "Bullshit repellent?" I read aloud.

"Oh absolutely," he says. "I've had that back to when I was mayor. That thing is over forty years old." According to the label, the repellent can "cure chronic bullshit" in a variety of realms including sales pitches, political discussion, and bedtime stories. I continue exploring the office, which is filled with relics of his leadership—framed bills and legislation, pictures with presidents, travel souvenirs. On the front of his desk is a large button with the word WHINING in a red circle and crossed out like a no-smoking sign. "That was from my Chief of Staff," he tells me.

His wife Deni walks through the door as we are looking around, coming from weeding in the garden. Norm invites her to lunch with us, but she has to run errands. While Norm calls to make us a reservation, Deni points to the top shelf, which is crammed with awards. "Those are just his most recent," she explains. "The lifetime achievement awards are making him nervous," she continues, "because he says he's not done yet."

> ***"The lifetime achievement awards are making him nervous, because he says he's not done yet."***

By all measures, Norm Mineta has used his 84 years well. To him, the world is driven by people and things that move; therefore, the importance of transportation is both intuitive and obvious. He sees this belief play out in the patterns of his own life. His father came to the United States alone on a boat when he was fourteen. One of his father's proudest purchases was a 1942 Packard automobile, which he had to sell prior to their internment. During the Korean War, Norm became a military intelligence officer, traveling to assignments in Tokyo and Japan by plane. ("I had the bad social disease of the 1950s," he tells me, cracking a smile. "It's called *gonna-Korea.*") He also met his wife on a plane, when she was working as a flight attendant.

He tells me to pay attention to the room around us, the clothes we're wearing. "Everything we do is dependent on transportation," Norm says.

The truth is I take most of this stuff for granted. I don't give much thought to how the products I use get to me. But Norm Mineta has spent much of his life ensuring that people and things get to where they need to go in the most efficient and cost effective manner possible.

He brushed up against the transportation field several times before it became a calling. As an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkley, Norm took the few courses in transportation that were offered, though he explains they had a narrow focus—"really just how the regulatory agencies worked," he says. It wasn't until 1971, when he was elected Mayor of San Jose—the first non-white mayor in the city's history—that he realized how important



Deni Mineta, President George W. Bush, First Lady Laura Bush, and Norm Mineta. (Photo used with permission from Mineta photo archives.)

transportation was in growing a city. "San Jose was making that transition from an agricultural town to high tech," he says. "Of course today, it's known as Silicon Valley."

In his four-year term as mayor, the city's population soared from 320,000 to 580,000. "Transportation became a basic thing we had to deal with at [the] local government [level]," Norm reflects. To increase municipal transit service, he bought the local bus lines from General Motors and had the city run it. (Now the Valley Transportation Authority oversees San Jose's transit.)

Norm was elected to the House of Representatives in 1975 and served on the Public Works and Transportation Committee for all of his eleven terms. "There's no single silver bullet in transportation," he learned. "It really requires a little highways, a little transit, airports—you have to keep working on the various transportation modes in order to have each of them be maximized in their capabilities at the local, state, and federal level."

For an example of the interconnection between systems, he names the Alameda Corridor, a twenty-mile railway that connects the national rail system near downtown Los Angeles to the city ports and Long Beach. Before the construction of the railroad, trucks and highways were the main method used to transport goods, and they couldn't accommodate the volume



Norman Mineta (white shirt, front) and his parents Kunisaku and Kane (right) were forced by the government to live in the Heart Mountain, Wyoming internment camp during World War II. Photo courtesy of NHK/Norman Mineta

of shipments being moved. Forty-seven percent of all shipping containers into the United States come through Los Angeles and Long Beach, and the ports were clogged with congestion. "They were struggling at the local level with financing, so I brought in some federal money to complete the corridor," he recalls.

Norm was the principal author of the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act—ISTEA, pronounced "Ice Tea." Landmark legislation, ISTEA was the first rewrite of the Highway and Transit Legislation since 1956, when President Eisenhower signed the National Defense Highway Bill, which allocated $25 billion in federal funds to build 41,000 miles of Interstate Highways. Before ISTEA, Norm explains, all the federal money went into the highway trust fund. "We wanted to raise the visibility of transit as an alternative to just building roads." So, with the passage of ISTEA, "for the first time we brought transit into the highway bill," says Norm proudly.

His goal was to make sure that everyone could have access to the improvements in mobility. The year before he wrote ISTEA, in fact, he'd written the transportation portion of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which protects people with disabilities from discrimination. The ADA requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations to employees with disabilities and enforces accessibility requirements on public accommodations. "The three big areas [of the ADA] were education, health, and transportation," he says. "Everyone considered transportation to be the toughest part of the ADA to get compliance with public and private companies."

In 1992, when President-elect Bill Clinton asked him to be Secretary of Transportation, Norm turned down the offer. “I was about to become Chairman of the House Committee on Public Works and Transportation,” he tells me. “That’s something I really wanted to do. That was going to be my brass ring.” Toward the end of his presidency, Clinton made Norm another offer, as Secretary of Commerce. By then, Norm recalls, he “almost crawled through the phone line” to indicate he would accept the appointment if offered.



President Bill Clinton and Secretary of Commerce Norm Mineta. (Photo used with permission from Mineta photo archives.)

Norm never forgot the trauma of his family’s internment. Prior to his appointment to the Clinton administration, Norm had fought for passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which included an apology from the United States to the interned Japanese American families. In August 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act into law, which for the first time acknowledged that the government’s actions during the Japanese American interment were based on “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.” Furthermore, in compensation, each surviving internee would receive $20,000.

I’m curious how Norm, after being interned, remained loyal to the United States and went on to enrich so many American lives. “You come to realize why this country is so great,” he explains. “It was willing to admit to a mistake and then make some redress for it.”



Congressman Norm Mineta watches President Reagan sign the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. (Photo used with permission from Mineta photo archives.)

Around 1pm, Norm drives us to historic Annapolis, to lunch at Carrol's Creek Cafe. (There is no public transit close to his home in Edgewater.) En route, I ask the former Secretary of Transportation if he's ever gotten pulled over for speeding. He smiles. "I sort of have a lead foot," he says, quietly evading the question.

We get a table next to the window, overlooking the water. Thunder rumbles in the distance, which Norm immediately identifies as engines of the Blue Angels, who are practicing for Friday's commencement at the Naval Academy. Throughout lunch, they zoom, glide, roll, and dive outside the window as restaurant patrons *ooh* and *ah*.

Norm picks up the story where we left off. In 2001, on the second offer to be Secretary of Transportation—this time coming from the second President Bush—Norm accepted. A member of the presidential cabinet and thirteenth in the Presidential Line of Succession, the Secretary of Transportation leads the Department of Transportation, overseeing eleven federal agencies that include the Federal Aviation Administration, the Federal Highway Administration, and the Federal Transit Administration. He made it his mission to improve communication between the agencies. "What you want to do," says Norm, "is make sure that the Department of Transportation is not so silo-ed that they're just talking up and down within each of the

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agencies, but that in fact they're talking across the various transportation modes."

To illustrate, he tells me that he once asked the Federal Highway Administration about their research and development relating to concrete. Then he went to the Federal Aviation Administration and asked the same questions. "Well the only real difference was that for highways, maybe the cement was 15 to 18 inches deep and runways, with those big planes coming down and hitting them—that's maybe three feet," says Norm. He asked the two agencies if they'd spoken to each about their findings, and both answered no. He told them, "Well that doesn't make sense."

Norm was still in his first year as Secretary of Transportation on September 11, 2001. Two days later, President Bush led a cabinet meeting with Democratic and Republican leaders. Norm recalls that a Congressman from Michigan named David Bonior stood up and said that in Detroit, the large Arab American and Muslim population was concerned about backlash towards their community. Specifically, they feared bans on airplane travel or the possibility of rounding them up and putting them in camps. President Bush was nodding as he listened to Representative Bonior. "We're equally concerned," President Bush assured him, "Because we don't want to happen today what happened to Norm in 1942."

Norm leans toward me, across the crab cake that we're sharing, and taps the table. "You could've taken a feather and knocked me off the chair when he said that," he recalls. President Bush had heard Norm's story about the evacuation and interment during their meeting at Camp David, in the president's first months in office. After dinner, "we stayed up until 8:30 or nine talking," recalls Norm, adding that was late for President Bush, who liked to go to bed early. President Bush carried Norm's stories with him, informing his decisions in the wake of the terrorist attack.

On the Monday following September 11, at the Islamic Study Center in DC, President Bush addressed a large group of Arab Americans and Muslims. He asked Norm to come, and Norm can recall the entire speech. "He said, 'We know who did that last Tuesday. They were not loyal Arab Americans. They were not faithful followers of Islam. They were terrorists, and we're going to go after them." Norm puts his fork down. "That's all he talked about," remarks Norm with a nod

of respect, "going after terrorists. He's never made an example out of Middle Easterners."

In six years, as the longest-serving Secretary of Transportation, Norm collected a lot of stories. In 2003, to increase seatbelt usage, he spearheaded the "Click-it or Ticket" campaign. "But I knew that if the Secretary of Transportation says, 'Click it or Ticket,' people would go, *Naaah*," says Norm, putting his thumb to his nose and wiggling the rest of his fingers, as in *na-na-na-boo-boo*. "So I approached [Brian] France at NASCAR, to see if I could get NASCAR to help promote seatbelt usage. Mr. France said, 'Sure! Whatever we can do.'"

Even though Norm didn't follow the sport closely, he knew how to get respect from the fans and drivers. "We used to go down to Talladega and Richmond and various places where they were having races," recalls Norm. At many races, Norm was grand marshal. "We changed the words a little," he explains. In front of "Gentlemen, start your engines," Norm would say, "Now that you're buckled up, gentlemen, start your engines." The campaign worked. Seatbelt usage went up, and fatalities on the road went down.

To Norm, public service and the golden rule are one and the same. Recently, he gave a speech at the Greater Austin Asian American Chamber of Commerce. "I want you to work hard and continue the activities of the Asian Pacific American community as well as the majority community," he said. "Everyone has two arms. So use your right arm to help yourself go up your ladder of success as you pursue your career and your professional goals. But with your left arm, reach down and pick someone else and pull them up behind you on your ladder of success." He encouraged them to maintain individual identity. "Don't shy away from you who are," he said. "Bring everything to the table."

We are on our last bites of seafood, and the Blue Angels have finished their rehearsal. "We are not a melting pot in this county," Norm says. "Because in a melting pot, you throw everything into the crucible, stir it up, and everything loses its identity." Instead, he likes to think of the United States as a tapestry, "where you've got yarns that individually are bright and beautiful but represent the art and the language and the religion of wherever our forbearers have come from. A tapestry, when it's woven together, makes for a strong hold," he says. "*E Pluribus unum.*"

> ***A tapestry, when it's woven together, makes for a strong hold.***

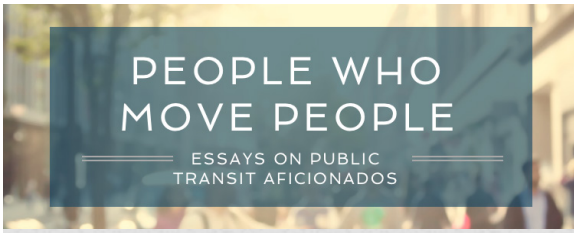
After lunch, Norm walks to the car leaning on his cane—a repurposed baseball bat he acquired as a gift for doing a three-day oral history project, which is archived in President Bush's library. On the way home, he tells a story about a recent trip from DC to Los Angeles, when he was traveling with his wife, Deni. "The past two or three trips, I've been randomly selected to get screened by the TSA," he begins. "So I'm getting wanded while Deni, who is cleared, is waiting for me on the other side." Next to Deni, a little boy was standing beside his father, watching the security guard pass the wand over Norm. "The little boy said to his father, 'Daddy, what did that man do wrong?'"

As the father tried to explain it was precautionary, Deni interrupted. "That man invented the system." The father took another look and said, "You know, I was thinking it was Secretary Mineta."

"They always wanna put me through the paces," Secretary Mineta tells me, turning into his driveway. "But that's okay. It proves they're doing their job." ■



Writer Laura Lee Huttenbach's first book is "The Boy is Gone: Conversations with a Mau Mau General" (Ohio University Press, 2015). Her website is www.LLHuttenbach.com.



People Who Move People is a web series profiling individuals who have made an impact in public transit. The series has been initiated and funded by RouteMatch Software, an Atlanta-based company who is passionate about transit and proud to record these stories. Find out more at peoplewhomovepeople.