In the Shadow of Heart Mountain: The Search for a Better America

2022 American Planning Association Asian and Pacific Islander Interest Group Speech by the Honorable Norman Y. Mineta

Hello, and thank you for that kind introduction.

I appreciate the invitation to speak before the Asian and Pacific Islander Interest Group of the American Planning Association. I applaud the creation of the Interest Group and its goals to increase the visibility of Asian and Pacific Islander planners in the profession and to highlight the planning issues facing Asian and Pacific Islander communities in America. It is critical that these communities have an advocate and a voice. Your contributions will broaden and deepen the understanding of our diverse communities. As today's and tomorrow's leaders, you have the formidable and important task of making our cities more equitable and inclusive for all residents.

As urban planners, you understand the history of the Asian and Pacific Islander experience in America and how this history is reflected in today's cities and ethnic communities. Many of you have experienced racism yourselves and are aware of the systemic inequalities in our society. Through your work in shaping urban policies, you play an integral role in ensuring that the elusive American Dream is accessible to all citizens and immigrants. As Asian and Pacific Islander planners, you will enrich the planning profession by sharing your life experiences, personal insights, and a common perspective.

I am pleased to share with you my reflections on growing up as an Asian American in San Jose, California, being elected as the Mayor of that City, and then serving in Congress and later in the Cabinet for two presidents.

As many of you know, as a young boy, I was faced with a choice of whether to believe in the American idea, or to harbor a resentment because my family had been denied the blessings of liberty promised in the Constitution.

In December 1941, I had just turned 10 years old. My family lived a normal and pleasant life in our hometown of San Jose, CA. My dad, who had emigrated to America in the early years of the 20th century, owned an insurance agency a few blocks from our family home, the house in which I was born, in what was then, and still is, proudly called, "Japan Town."

On December 7th, when the Empire of Japan attacked our American fleet at Pearl Harbor, it was an act of war, and as President Franklin Roosevelt put it so memorably, "a day that will live in infamy."

Ten weeks later, on February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt presided over his own day of infamy--- as he signed Executive Order 9066. Entered into the Federal Register two days later, a stroke of FDR's pen upended my family's life and the lives of 120,000 other American citizens or legal immigrants of Japanese ancestry. The order forced the "evacuation"—a sterile word to describe mass arrests---of 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry to prison camps.

Our crime was our ancestry, and nothing else. There was never a national security issue, only racial prejudice.

The Mineta family ended up at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. The facility was rimmed with barbed wire, and the machine gun towers and searchlights faced inward. The government tried to say it was protective custody, but we were prisoners in our own country.

A great many of the 120,000 prisoners in the camps across the west and in Arkansas lost their homes, their businesses, and their land during the course of their confinement. Many of them never recovered from what their country did to them. Yet, many of the young men still chose to enlist in the Army. Japanese Americans, most of them with their families in camps, were awarded over 20 Congressional Medals of Honor and 4,000 Purple Hearts, all of them fighting in segregated Japanese American units.

The crucial and tragic lesson to be learned about Executive Order 9066 is that Americans of Japanese ancestry had no one in positions of power and authority advocating on their behalf. They had no access. Political leaders were not accountable. So Constitutional guarantees gave way to public hysteria. People who should have known better—and who were in positions to do better---failed their responsibility.

After the war, we returned to San Jose and I returned to school. At San Jose High School, I served as student body president. I was a Japanese American who had lived in an American prison camp only four years earlier. And now my schoolmates---mostly Caucasian -- were electing me to be their student leader. It was a short time, but it felt like a long way from being in the shadow of Heart Mountain.

After graduating from UC-Berkeley, I served in the U.S. Army as an intelligence officer during the final stages of the Korean War. After active duty, I joined my dad in the insurance business. I also became active in local politics and various causes. Based on our internment experience, many of us in the Japanese American community knew we needed access to our leaders to hold them accountable. The best way to achieve that was to have a seat at the table. And what was true then, is equally true today.

So, I served on city commissions, and in 1967 I was appointed to fill a vacancy on the San Jose City Council. Two years later I was elected in my own right. And in 1971, I was elected Mayor in my hometown, and the first person of Asian ancestry ever elected mayor of a city on the mainland. Again, it seemed a long way from the camps at Heart Mountain, Wyoming.

The morning after the election I went out back to the garage. When I went to open the garage door, I saw that someone had spray painted “J A P” on the door. Heart Mountain wasn’t so far away, after all.

I served as Mayor, and later as a Member of Congress and as Secretary of Commerce for President Bill Clinton and Secretary of Transportation for President George W. Bush.

A few months into President Bush’s Bush presidency America was attacked. Without warning. Without provocation.

It was September 11th -- sixty years after Pearl Harbor.

Al Qaeda terrorists hijacked four commercial airplanes, and flew two into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, one into the Pentagon. A fourth plane was headed for the Capitol or the White House, but crashed in southwestern Pennsylvania when brave passengers stormed the cockpit.

I was one of the few Cabinet members who reached the White House that day. In the underground bunker there was Vice President Dick Cheney and National Security Advisor Condi Rice. They were speaking via secure hook-up to President Bush, who had been at a Florida elementary school.

When the third plane—American Airlines flight 77---hit the Pentagon, I was on the phone to the operations executive at the FAA. I ordered him to have all planes currently in U.S. airspace---about 6,000 in all -- to immediately land at the nearest airport.

In the aftermath of the attacks, America responded. We grieved. We went to war. We promised to bring those responsible to justice.

But also, out of the shadows came the haters. Hate crimes were committed against Muslims and Arab Americans---and people mistaken for Muslims and Arab Americans. Mosques were vandalized. Neighborhoods were terrorized. A future President would lie about where he was and what he saw on 9/11, when he said he was in New Jersey and saw thousands of Arabs cheering when the twin towers came down.

The specter of Executive Order 9066 was never far from my mind; nor, as it turned out, was it far from President Bush's mind, either.

In a Cabinet meeting that week, the President spoke about the hate crimes, about how they would not be tolerated. Then, looking around the Cabinet table, and settling his gaze on me, he said, "We are not going to let happen to Muslims and Arab Americans what happened to my friend, Norm Mineta, during World War II.".

Six days after 9/11, President Bush went to a mosque and said, "Those who feel like they can intimidate our fellow citizens to take out their anger don't represent the best of America, they represent the worst of humankind, and they should be ashamed of that kind of behavior."

And now, over twenty years later, those words are still ringing in my ears. "They don't represent the best of America, they represent the worst of humankind, and they should be ashamed of that kind of behavior."

Those words are ringing in my ears because those are the people I saw storming the Capitol on January 6th.

January 6th was also a day of infamy. The facts are unassailable: An assault on our democracy occurred as the U.S. Capitol was attacked by a highly motivated crowd of people who broke into it and searched for prisoners -- including the Vice President and Speaker of the House. They intended to overturn a legal presidential election by force, even murder. Virtually all of them were Trump supporters. Not Antifa. Not insider provocateurs, nor so-called "deep state" malcontents. They were

domestic terrorists -- badly organized domestic terrorists -- who trashed the Capitol, built gallows, attacked police officers, and then tried to deny they were even at this coup attempt.

Today, as I talk to you, we are faced with two pandemics.

The first is the virus called COVID-19. It makes us physically sick. To date, the pandemic has killed over 800,000 Americans and this number continues to climb with each new variant.

The second is the pandemic of hatred and intolerance. It has attacked the body politic of our nation. It promotes lies about stolen elections. It attacks the rule of law because the judge administering it may be of Hispanic heritage. It degrades women and minorities. It seeks to divide us into tribes, sow fear among us about medicines, government, and religion.

It turns frightened men and women into cowards and mean-spirited individuals into petty demagogues. It has spread into our communities, the Congress, and other institutions we revere.

We've seen this disease at other times. The passage of Jim Crow laws, the Trail of Tears, the McCarthy era, the aftermath of 9/11, and once again the rise in hate crimes and violence against Asian Americans and immigrants. It is the same sickness I witnessed standing in the shadow of Heart Mountain, Wyoming.

A nation faces mortal danger when its citizens do not understand democracy and their responsibilities to ensure its success. As the classical scholar, Edith Hamilton, wrote about Athens, "When the freedom they wished for most, was freedom from responsibility, then Athens ceased to be free, and was never free again."

And that's what this disease does. It seeks out those who are not educated on the foundation of our republic. It resists teaching us that the rule of law" is a principle, not an eternal guarantee. That the "peaceful transfer of power" is a tradition, not a certainty.

You are the nation builders. I will continue to speak out, but I also hand over my set of tools to each of you.

Reenergize your efforts to defend our Constitution and educate Americans about our democracy. Come to it with a courageous heart, a determined eye, and a steady spirit. We have been given so much. It is time to earn our good fortune.