



### Lessons from the Life of Norman Mineta: On Scapegoating and Social Justice

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At just ten years old, Norman Mineta, a California native and lawful American citizen, was forced to abandon his beloved dog, Skippy. But it was not Skippy who would soon find himself penned, however; it was Mineta. Instead of living out his childhood under the sunny San Jose skies, Mineta and his family would spend the next several years in an uninsulated barrack behind a barbed wire fence at the Heart Mountain internment camp in Cody, Wyoming. There they endured the repeated humiliations and deprivations of unjust confinement, such as communal showers, which they took under the watchful eye of armed guards with express orders to shoot anyone who tried to escape ("Norman Mineta and His Legacy: An American Story"). Mineta's crime, you may ask? Being a Japanese American during World War II.

This essay begins by describing Mineta's plight and moreover traces the specific sociopolitical conditions that gave rise to the abuse of persons of Japanese descent in America following the attack on Pearl Harbor. The travesties Mineta witnessed and experienced, however, are framed as the catalyst for his subsequent immeasurable social contributions. This essay concludes with an examination of Mineta's relevance for the present day. Drawing upon the work of the rhetorician and literary critic Kenneth Burke, I argue that the manner in which Mineta's civil liberties were violated (along with those of thousands of others) was an act of scapegoating by a fearful public.

In this way, the purpose of this essay is multifunctional. While certainly the clear intention is to recount Mineta's experiences and accomplishments as an act of praise, a perhaps more significant ancillary objective assumes the form of an implicit call to action. It might be easy, tempting perhaps, to see the injustices committed against Mineta and his family as belonging to a less tolerant—less enlightened—time, yet there remain comparable breaches of justice in the contemporary era. This brief biographical sketch therefore serves as an opportunity and inducement to learn from the offenses committed against Mineta and those like him on behalf of the U.S. government and draw parallels to the present day. Mineta's case thus serves as a cautionary tale, encouraging the

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reader to reflect on how best to prevent events like these from ever occurring again.

### A Day Which Will Live in Infamy

On December 7, 1941, the Empire of Japan attacked the United States Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (“Remembering Pearl Harbor”). This act of aggression against the United States was the incendiary event that prompted President Franklin D. Roosevelt to deliver his now famous “Day of Infamy” speech, wherein he beseeched Congress to authorize war on Japan (Library of Congress). A few short months later, on February 19, 1942, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 into effect, which authorized the detention and internment of those deemed a national security threat (United States, Executive Office of the President [Franklin D Roosevelt]). Rather than identify true risks to national security, though, these initiatives targeted the average citizen of Japanese ancestry, Mineta’s family included. Over the course of the next six months, 122,000 men, women, and children were forced to relocate to internment camps.

The Order made no distinction between an individual who was issei, a Japan-born resident, or a nisei, a second-generation American-born person of Japanese heritage. In fact, even though ethnic Japanese were explicitly targeted, the Order was written in a deniable manner, without designating specific ethnic groups, for the removal of people from designated geographic areas in order to prevent espionage and sabotage. Similarly, in an opaque manner, the Order provided “for residents of any such area who are excluded therefrom, such transportation, food, shelter, and other accommodations as may be necessary,” which actually meant forcible removal, detention and internment (Executive Order 9066). And despite the fact that of these more than 100,000 individuals, approximately 70,000 were American citizens, none were afforded their constitutional due process rights in this military operation. Charges were never brought against them, nor were they able to appeal the sentence they were carrying out.

### Life Inside the Camps

The camps to which these families were relocated were a bleak contrast from the life they had once known. The Heart Mountain Relocation Center, where Mineta and his family were incarcerated, consisted of 467 barrack-style buildings, each fitted with a flimsy tar paper roof. Each unit was just one room, meant to accommodate families up to six; there was a single stove for heat, a lone ceiling light, and army cots for sleeping. As Karolin and Aden note, these “homes” were



more like “housing facilities,” as “the poorly constructed living facilities did not create a place of security. Instead, the barracks were a space of distress, leaving the children no time to recuperate from their day” (194). This is the backdrop against which tens of thousands of families were forced to forfeit their civil liberties. And for many, their old lives would be lost to them forever, as they were suddenly forced to abandon their jobs, businesses, and networks of friends (Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation). What’s more, instead of working in their former, often highly skilled, technical jobs, those interned at Heart Mountain were relegated to working in the local farming fields or staffing the mess hall on the compound for a meager \$16 and \$12 a month, respectively (Bailey 11). And so, without the sense of security and fulfillment derived from the livelihoods they once knew, or the opportunity to participate in beloved pastimes and freedoms, all the incarcerated at Heart Mountain could do was wait—wait for the U.S. government to determine their fate.

### The Road to Reparations

On December 17, 1944, almost two full years after the War Relocation Authority (WRA) oversaw the removal of Japanese residents and Japanese American citizens from their homes, the exclusionary legislation targeting this population was lifted (“Japanese-American Internment Camp Newspapers, 1942 to 1946”). Mineta and his family were finally free. But, upon his release, what the young Mineta did next came as a shock to many: he started down a path to serving the very government that stripped him of his rights.

In 1971, Mineta was elected mayor of San Jose, California, and then just four short years later, he would be elected as a state representative in the U.S. Congress (Lee). In this capacity, Mineta worked tirelessly with other members of Congress to draft legislation designed to redress the injustices committed during World War II. Mineta’s efforts were met with great resistance, and at times, from surprising sources, including Senator Ichiye Hayakawa of California, an individual of Japanese ancestry himself, who called the legislation “ridiculous,” adding that “to ask for the restitution is merely the rekindling of resentment and racism that no longer exists” (“Long Road to Redress | US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives”). President Reagan, too, opposed redress legislation for a number of reasons, primary among which was that it ostensibly undercut “his accomplishments on behalf of fiscal conservatism, and his call for a balanced



budget. Establishing a \$1.5 billion trust fund in this matter saddled him with the sins of his Democratic predecessors” (Maga 606). President Reagan was also concerned about the optics of the redress, as he feared the American public might perceive some outside Japanese influence on American domestic policy by way of such a bill.

Despite such formidable opposition, however, Mineta kept working behind the scenes and was ultimately able to win over a majority of his fellow representatives in Congress, with the support of his constituents in California. He had bipartisan support in the form of California’s Republican Senator Pete Wilson, in addition to Wyoming’s Republican Senator Alan Simpson, who in an ironic twist of fate, had met Mineta when he was a Boy Scout visiting the Heart Mountain internment camp where the Mineta family had been confined (Lundstrom and Pizarro). The House Democratic leadership opened the 99th Congress in 1985 with the introduction of the bill, naming it after the celebrated heroes of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a segregated Japanese American combat unit, which was among the most decorated in the war. Mineta was the first person to testify to the House Judiciary Committee, and spoke powerfully about how internment affected his family: “I was a U.S. citizen at birth,” he stated. “I had all of the rights promised to all the citizens in the Constitution, and I was 10 ½ years old. There was no reason, absolutely none, to fear me. Was I supposedly a saboteur? A spy? A secret agent? No one has ever explained to me what threat I posed or even could have been seen to pose” (“Long Road to Redress | US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives”).

It was, in large part, Mineta’s testimony that helped the bill pass the House with a 243 to 141 majority (House Vote #304 -- Sep 17, 1987”). Yet, while Mineta’s personal account spoke to his stake in the creation and passage of the bill, when it came time to vote on it, he was the only congressperson in the entire chamber not to vote “yea” or “nay” on the issue. Instead, in order to avoid a conflict of interest and the appearance of bias due to the fact that this was an issue so dear to his own heart, he opted to vote “present.” He wanted the case for equal protection under the law to be made on its own merits and he did not want his own personal beliefs to taint what he believed to be a constitutionally guaranteed right of all Americans (“Long Road to Redress”).





So, in 1988, with Mineta by his side, in one of his final acts of office, President Reagan finally signed the Civil Liberties Act into law in order to compensate the Japanese Americans who were illegally incarcerated in internment camps during World War II. The law offered a formal national apology and paid out \$20,000 in compensation to each surviving victim (“\$20,000, Apology Voted for WWII Japanese Internees”). While the sum of the compensation was paltry in comparison to the federal government’s transgressions against its Japanese American citizens and lawful Japanese residents, it was lauded as a momentous gesture, in which the U.S. conceded culpability.

### A Convenient Scapegoat

After learning of all that Mineta and countless others just like him endured, one is inevitably met with the question of “How could this happen?” To respond to such a question, it may be helpful to consult the work of Kenneth Burke and his conception of scapegoating. In his theory of dramatism, Burke presents the symbolic ritual of scapegoating as a mechanism of sensemaking—that is, simply put, how people make sense of certain events (Weick). Heavily influenced by the horrors of World War II, and writing in the wake of them, Burke’s *Rhetoric of Motives* explores the concepts of guilt, shame, and atonement. And while Burke places his analyses in the context of the Jewish people, specifically, many of his reflections are nonetheless applicable to cases like Mineta’s. Burke writes, “Once Hitler has thus essentialized his enemy [in the form of the scapegoat], all ‘proof’ henceforth’ is automatic” (167). In much the same way, once the U.S. had identified all persons of Japanese descent as the enemy, they no longer required evidence—proof, as Burke puts it—of crimes committed.

According to the framework established by Burke, in assigning blame to another person—or groups of people, as in the case of incarcerated Japanese Americans like Mineta—members of society are able not only make sense of a disturbance to the status quo, but more importantly, conceptually restore it. As he sees it, imbuing the scapegoat with the sins of the collective and then sacrificing it performs a cathartic function for society as a whole. In other words, “Society is united through the act of casting from their midst a common enemy” (Braden 5). Consider, for example, how Burke’s concept of the scapegoat functions in the context of the attack on Pearl Harbor as the catalyst for the U.S.’s entry in World War II. Here, Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans living in the U.S. at



the time were designated the scapegoat that would allow the American public, and the world, for that matter, to make sense of the unprovoked attack on Pearl Harbor. And it is much easier to comprehend such an atrocity when the enemy is singular and identifiable.

### Parallels with the Present Day

With almost eighty years since the onset of World War II behind us, it might be easy to write off the egregious acts committed—the construction of internment camps surely included—as the ills of another, far-off time. The truth is, however, that the social function of a scapegoat is a timeless one, going back millennia. So, while the scapegoat itself may change based on the social and political events of the time, the act of scapegoating is perennial. As Braden reminds, “When the next crisis occurs, another scapegoat will be sought to carry the burden” (5).

This much is apparent when one considers that though those of Japanese descent were the scapegoat upon whose back all the frustrations and fears of American society were heaped during World War II, the villainous caricature that was constructed of them was actually first assigned to another group. While those of Japanese origin and heritage had come to be dubbed the “Yellow Peril” during World War II, this pejorative moniker was once ascribed to the Chinese. The Yellow Peril was a derogatory term used to refer to the Asian—mostly Chinese—immigrants to the United States (specifically, the American West) as laborers (Wu). The reference to “yellow” was meant as an insulting commentary on the skin tone of many East Asian individuals, and “peril” suggested that they put American cultural values, norms, and ideologies at risk. In this way, the scapegoat is a moving target, one that only finds its mark based on the specific needs of the society of the time.

In order for scapegoating to occur, however, so must “othering.” The act of othering may be defined as a process through which one individual or group of people attributes negative qualities to another group, and in doing so, symbolically constructs this group of individuals as their opposite or antithesis (Rohleder). The concept of othering has been discussed in many contexts, from gender divisions and biases to the pitting of one ethnic or racial group against another. Regardless of its applications, though, othering is seen as the root cause of the harmful exploitation of differences, and as a requisite for scapegoating. In other words, in order to scapegoat another group of individuals, they must first be



seen as different from—and usually, lesser than—oneself. As the Montreal Holocaust Museum notes, “othering” results in an “Us vs. Them” mentality, and can set into motion a variety of horrific events, including the construction of the concentration camps in the case of the Jewish people, and the internment camps in the case of those of Japanese descent in America (“What Is Othering?”).

In the present day, scholars like Aldo Quiroz Lewis have found that scapegoating, and the dehumanization and “othering” of certain groups of people is alive and well. He examined anti-immigration websites to argue that different immigrant populations were often constructed as the scapegoat for contemporary society’s economic woes. One important point that Lewis introduces is that in his analyses, he found that diverse groups of Latin immigrants to the U.S. were treated as a single group (a single scapegoat), even though they came from several different countries and cultures throughout South and Central America.

This process of reducing the “other” to a common, identifiable enemy can be witnessed even more recently, with the public response to Covid-19, wherein a number of individuals of Asian heritage were deemed to blame for the Covid-19-induced suffering. During this time, headlines like “Hate Crimes and Pandemic Lead More Asian Americans to Seek Therapy” (Lukpat) and “More Than 9,000 Anti-Asian Incidents Have Been Reported Since the Pandemic Began” (Associated Press) became commonplace. In fact, a 2022-2023 study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that approximately one in three Asian Americans know someone who was threatened or assaulted due to Covid-19-related Asian hate (Ruiz et al.). As the second of these headlines suggests, and just as with the internment camps of World War II, scapegoating in this instance has escalated into injustice and violence.

This comes as a timely reminder with Asian Pacific American Heritage month being celebrated in May. As of 2019, there are approximately 22.4 million Asians living in the U.S., with this group of individuals making up around 7% of the nation’s population (Budiman and Ruiz). While those of Asian heritage have become increasingly integrated in American society, and America itself is becoming increasingly multicultural, we must seek to understand the means by which these individuals are being thrust into the position of the scapegoat and how this works against their full inclusion in American life.



### **Learning from the Past and Looking to the Future**

Norman Mineta's entire career was characterized by acts of political courage, from being an early advocate for LGBTQ equality to co-authoring the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1991. He would also make history as the first Asian-American cabinet secretary to be appointed, serving both Democratic and Republican presidents (Lundstrom and Pizarro). As Transportation Secretary during the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Mineta was credited by President George W. Bush for using his own childhood experiences to caution against the scapegoating of Muslim Americans (Morrison). Truly, though, it was his work on the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 that most symbolizes the courage of a politician who, instead of harboring resentment, worked his entire life to help America better realize its democratic ideals. According to Becky Belcore, in doing so, Minetta "helped create an ecosystem for Asian American advocacy," (Shainwald).

But more than serving as a celebratory story of triumph over tribulation, Mineta's story highlights the dangers and very real consequences of scapegoating. The first step to prevent future incidents from occurring is to better understand the conditions that give rise to these incidents in the first place, which is precisely what this short essay has aimed to do. And while the road to social justice is nonetheless an ongoing one, is it fair to say that Norman Mineta undoubtedly paved the way for future progress, for Asian Americans, and for all Americans.





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