

In This Special Issue #409

Remembering Norm Mineta's Legacy on September 11, 2026



[We thank Daphne Kwok, a Committee of 100 member, a Founder of the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAICS), and Executive Director of APAICS at the time of the 2001 terrorist attacks, for contributing to this special issue.]

September 11 marks a date seared into our nation's collective memory. As we reflect on it, APA Justice wants to highlight and help preserve the leadership role that then-U.S. Transportation Secretary **Norman "Norm" Mineta** played on that day and in the years that preceded and followed — drawing on a firsthand account from **Daphne Kwok**, who attended a recent forum honoring his legacy and shared her reflections with APA Justice in a report titled "NEVER FORGET."

A Forum in Washington



On September 9, 2026, the Mineta Transportation Institute (MTI) at San Jose State University (SJSU) hosted a forum at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, to reflect on Norm Mineta's leadership during September 11, 2001 — twenty-five years later. Daphne attended.

At the convening, attendees heard about Norm's decisive order grounding all planes over U.S. airspace — one of the most consequential decisions made that day — and about his call to Canada's Minister of Transport requesting assistance landing inbound overseas flights that could no longer reach the United States.

Attendees also recalled a remark from then-President **George W. Bush** during that period: "We don't want to have happen today what happened to Norm in 1942" — a direct reference to the internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II, including Norm and his family. That history shaped how Norm approached the difficult days that followed.

In the aftermath of 9/11, xenophobia and hate crimes quickly proliferated in communities across the country, with Muslim and Arab American communities bearing the brunt as scapegoats for an attack they had nothing to do with.

Balbir Singh Sodhi was the [first person killed](#) in a retaliatory hate crime after the September 11 terrorist attacks. The 52-year-old Sikh American was killed outside a gas

station he owned in Mesa, Arizona. He wore a turban and kept a beard as part of his Sikh faith. The gunman, **Frank Silva Roque**, drove around looking for people he believed were Middle Eastern or Muslim to target in revenge for 9/11. He mistakenly targeted Sodhi, who was planting flowers outside his business.

Norman Mineta and His Legacy - An American Story



Norman Yoshio Mineta 峯田 良雄 was born in San Jose, California, on November 12, 1931. He passed away at age 90 in Edgewater, Maryland, on May 3, 2022.

Norm was a mentor to both Daphne and **Jeremy Wu** — who served under him at the Department of Transportation as Departmental Civil Rights Director and later Acting Chief Statistician — and to an entire generation of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) activists, leaders, and concerned citizens.

But his story is really an American story.

His life and legacy are the subject of "[Norman Mineta and His Legacy: An American Story](#)," a 56-minute documentary produced by Bridge Media, Inc. and distributed as a free educational resource through the [Mineta Legacy Project](#).

Among the many firsts of Norm's accomplishments are:

- First Asian American mayor of a major American city — elected the 59th mayor of San Jose in 1971.
- First Asian American to hold a presidential cabinet post — nominated by President **Bill Clinton** as U.S. Secretary of Commerce in 2000.
- First Asian American to serve as U.S. Secretary of Transportation — appointed by President **George W. Bush** in 2001.
- Only the fourth person in U.S. history — and by extension the first Asian American — to serve as a cabinet member under two presidents from different political parties (Clinton, a Democrat, and Bush, a Republican).

Norm co-founded the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC) in 1994 and served as its first chair. CAPAC advocates on issues affecting the AANHPI community at the federal level. Before CAPAC existed, AAPI concerns had no institutional home or dedicated advocacy structure on Capitol Hill. Today CAPAC has grown to 85 members, chaired by Rep. **Grace Meng** with Executive Director **Judith Teruya**. Chair Meng — the first Asian American elected to Congress from the East Coast — has credited Norm directly as a mentor, recalling that he founded CAPAC after watching Black and Hispanic members of Congress secure White House access that AAPI members lacked at the time.

Norm also co-founded APAICS in 1994 (originally as the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus Institute, later rebranded), alongside Delegate **Robert Underwood** — the same year he founded CAPAC. While CAPAC represents sitting members of Congress, APAICS was designed to build the pipeline of future AAPI leaders — training programs, fellowships, and leadership development specifically for the next generation of AAPI elected officials and congressional staff. This was a deliberate long-term investment.

Takeaways From "Norman Mineta and His Legacy"

There are many takeaways moments from the documentary [Norman Mineta and His Legacy: An American Story](#), including:

1. "We Will Not Do to Muslim Americans What We Did to Norm"



Shortly after becoming Transportation Secretary, Norm spent a weekend with newly inaugurated President George W. Bush at Camp David. Over dinner, Bush asked him directly: "Tell me about camp life. Tell me about the evacuation." What struck observers, the documentary notes, was that Norm's answer carried no bitterness — "here's the greatest democracy in the world interning fellow citizens because of their background," yet Norm's response was instructive rather than angry. That conversation is part of what shaped President Bush's now-famous instinct, in the days after 9/11, to warn his cabinet against repeating history: "We will not do to Muslim Americans what we had done to Norm's family."

2. A Boy Scout Friendship That Passed the Civil Liberties Act



At Heart Mountain, an 11-year-old Norm joined a Boy Scout troop inside the concentration camp. Scout leaders wrote to nearby towns asking for troops willing to visit — most refused, until a troop from Cody, Wyoming, finally came. Paired off to pitch a tent together, Norm met a fellow "pesky" kid named **Alan Simpson**. The two wrote to each other for decades: Norm was elected to the House in 1974, Simpson to the Senate in 1978, and their friendship carried on as if, in Norm's words, "we were still sitting in that pup tent."

That friendship became essential decades later. When Norm pushed for redress for Japanese American incarceration — a bill that had died in committee year after year — it was Simpson, a conservative Republican in a chamber Democrats did not control, who helped carry it through the Senate alongside Senators **Spark Matsunaga** and **Daniel Inouye**. Norm chose September 17, 1987 — the 200th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution — for the House vote on H.R. 442. Nearly a year later, on August 10, 1988, President **Ronald Reagan** signed the Civil Liberties Act into law: an official government apology, and \$20,000 in reparations, to the 120,000 Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II. One observer in the documentary calls it "his crowning achievement" — legislation Norm pursued not as "a Japanese American issue," but as a test of whether the Constitution truly protects everyone, "regardless of race or culture."

3. A Racial Slur on Election Night



Norm's 1971 mayoral victory made international news. But the morning after, he found the words "NO JAPS WANTED" — the World War II-era anti-Japanese slur — spray-painted across his garage door in Japantown. "You don't make a big thing out of it," he later reflected, "but you store it away," before turning his focus to running the city. It is a small, sobering detail that complicates the triumphant history of his landmark win.

4. The Apartment That Wasn't "Available"



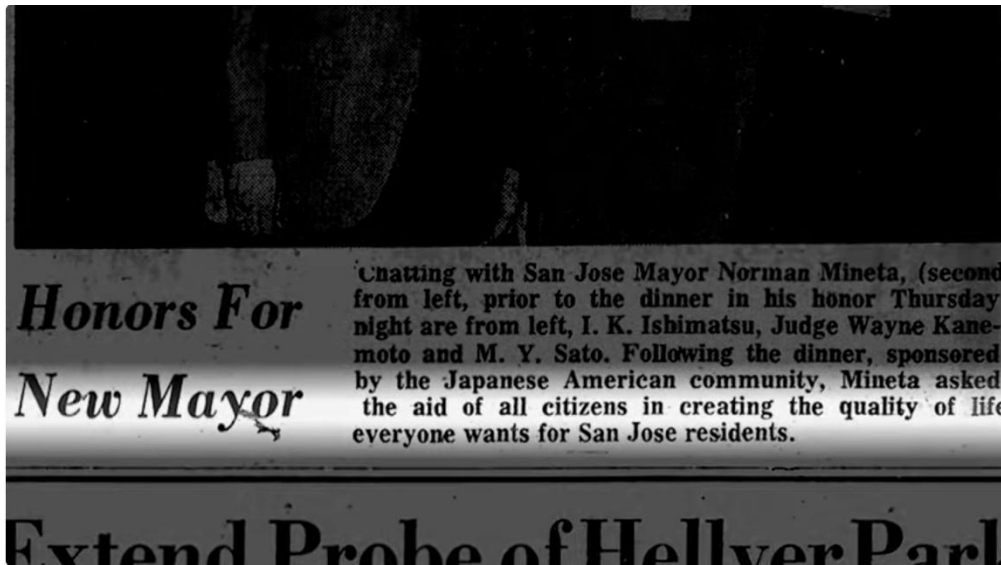
Years earlier, while engaged to be married, Norm answered a newspaper ad for an apartment. When he arrived, the landlord's wife told him she thought her husband had already rented it out — then called out to her husband to confirm, and he claimed it was gone. Norm walked to the corner gas station, called the same number, and asked if the apartment was still available. "Yeah, it's still available," the same man told him — this time not realizing who was asking. Norm never forgot the blatant discrimination, and in time, he would work to end it and many injustices like it.

5. "I Still Get Treated Like a Foreigner"



Despite five decades of public service and a career of historic firsts, Norm admitted the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype never fully disappeared. "I still get treated like a foreigner," he said, describing the subtle scrutiny of stepping into an elevator and feeling people "give you the once over." It is why he always wore an American flag pin — not to prove his patriotism, he explained, but his citizenship: "I want to make sure everyone knows I am American."

6. Solidarity Beyond the AAPI Community



The documentary highlights two lesser-known chapters of Norm's advocacy. He was one of the earliest members of Congress to publicly endorse same-sex marriage, reasoning that "if a gay man could be one of the leaders in getting justice for us, we could do the same for him and his people." And as a primary sponsor of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Norm's motivation traced back to his time as San Jose's mayor, when he spent time in a wheelchair to understand the barriers people with disabilities faced — which is why, the documentary notes, curb cutouts exist on street corners today.

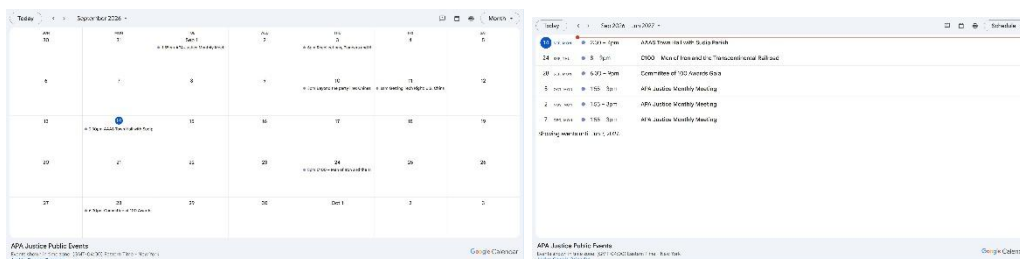
In Closing

Norm Mineta spent a lifetime being asked to prove he belonged in the country he never stopped believing in. Twenty-five years after 9/11, and four years after his passing, his answer to that question is still the clearest gift he left us: build the institutions, tell the truth about what happened, and never let one community's fear become another community's punishment.

Watch the [full documentary](#). NEVER FORGET.

News and Activities for the Communities

1. APA Justice Community Calendar



Upcoming Events:

2026/09/14 AAAS Town Hall with Sudip Parikh

2026/09/24 C100 – Men of Iron and the Transcontinental Railroad

2026/09/28 Committee of 100 Awards Gala

2026/10/05 APA Justice Monthly Meeting

Visit <https://bit.ly/3XD61qV> for event details.

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APA Justice Task Force is a non-partisan platform to build a sustainable ecosystem that addresses racial profiling concerns and to facilitate, inform, and advocate on selected issues related to justice and fairness for the Asian Pacific American community. For more information, please refer to the APA Justice website at www.apajusticetaskforce.org. We value your feedback. Please send your comments to contact@apajustice.org.

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