

# Journey of Japanese Americans — 75 Years After Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066



Author Junko Iwabuchi

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## On a Sunny Saturday Morning in LA

His face brightened with a big affectionate smile when he replied “Yeah?” to me as I said “I used to live with a Japanese American family in the Bay Area up north when I was a student.” The distinguished looking gentleman, elderly but in good physical shape, was Norman Mineta. He was standing right in front of me and we were at the historic site of Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist temple in Los Angeles, now the home of the Go for Broke National Education Center (“Go for Broke” is the motto of a World War II Japanese-American military unit, the 442nd RCT, well known in military history for their exceptional valor and sacrifice), for the inauguration of their newly installed exhibition titled “Defining Courage”.

Mineta is a longtime politician from San Jose, California, a diehard Democrat, and the first presidential Cabinet member of Asian American descent, who served both the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. Along with his friend Republican Senate Whip Alan Simpson, he is also known as the driving force behind the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which officially apologized to Japanese Americans, redressed the injustices they suffered during World War II, and awarded restitution payments of \$20,000 to Japanese-American survivors.

It was Saturday, May 28, during the Memorial weekend of 2016, and on the previous day President Barack Obama had made a historic visit to Hiroshima. I was in Los Angeles that week to visit

and conduct interviews at the Japanese American National Museum as a part of my research trip on Japanese American history and I couldn't help asking Japanese Americans how they felt about Obama's visit to Hiroshima. The site of Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist temple that once functioned as a temporary house for the Japanese American National Museum and is now the location of the Go for Broke National Education Center, is across the plaza from the current Japanese American National Museum. Mineta is the chairman of the board at the museum and after chatting with museum staff members, I found out that he was flying into town for the inauguration of the Go for Broke National Education Center on Friday night. On Saturday morning, I went to the inauguration ceremony with the firm determination to meet Mineta, who is a veteran himself, and ask how *he* felt about Obama's Hiroshima visit.

It was a bright and typically sunny LA morning and for me, as someone born and raised in Japan who still has a Japanese passport, it was the first time to attend a Memorial Day event honoring the veterans of the U.S. military. The first part of the event was defined as a Memorial Day commemoration of fallen heroes and honoring the surviving veterans of WWII. It took place in front of the Go For Broke Monument that bears the names of 16,126 *Nisei* (second-generation Japanese American) soldiers and the main inscription on the stone reads as follows: *Rising to the defense of their country, by the thousands they came — these young Japanese American soldiers from Hawaii, the states, America's concentration*

Photo: Author



Mr. Norman Mineta and the author

Photo: Author



Opening ceremony at the Go for Broke National Education Center



Photo: Author

Elderly veterans escorted by young cadets

*camps — to fight in Europe and the Pacific during World War II. Looked upon with suspicion, set apart and deprived of their constitutional rights, they nevertheless remained steadfast and served with indomitable spirit and uncommon valor, for theirs was a fight to prove loyalty. This legacy will serve as a sobering reminder that never again shall any group be denied liberty and the rights of citizenship. — Ben H. Tamashiro*

I'm used to listening to the American national anthem on various occasions, but I had never been at ceremony where I had to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag myself. I felt a strange sensation in my stomach when I heard the last phrase "with liberty and justice for all" as I looked towards the veterans in their 90s who had once been incarcerated in wartime relocation camps, deprived of their liberty and justice as American citizens, and had to fight to regain it by proving their loyalty to the country through joining the military forces. These elderly veterans were born in the United States and went to school here, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance every day until one day they were suddenly denied their rights as citizens. I was standing there, just observing the ceremony as a journalist from



Photo: Author

Mr. Tokuji Yoshihashi, formerly of the 100th Infantry Battalion during WWII

another country, but I couldn't help being overtaken by emotion and felt tears surging up in my eyes. I couldn't figure out what exactly was happening with me then, but as I saw the elderly *Nisei* veterans, who are as tiny and frail as any old Japanese American men, trying to stand tall, even though some of them were confined to wheelchairs, and looking bright and proud, I felt a strong bond with them as if they were my own grandfathers.

The elderly veterans were ushered to another location for the inauguration of the Go for Broke National Education Center escorted by young cadets after the anthem and the Pledge of Allegiance had been performed with the presence of the color guard flown in from the state of Hawaii. I rushed in the direction that they were walking with a camera in my hand and I spotted one veteran, Tokuji Yoshihashi (91 years old at that time), who had kindly spoken with me before the ceremony. He recognized me in the crowd and waved



Photo: Author

The Go for Broke Monument that bears the names of 16,126 Nisei soldiers



Photo: Author

Local news media at the ceremony



at me smiling and immediately I smiled and waved back to him. We were able to exchange words only for 10-15 minutes (I did ask him how he felt about Obama's visit to Hiroshima the day before) but when I saw him walking, smiling and waving at me, I felt as if I had become his proud granddaughter and nearly cried one more time.

### Elderly Japanese American Men Are All Grandfather to Me

As the program went on, religious leaders of every faith (and every congregation in the case of Christians) in the community took to the podium to give a speech of congratulation on the inauguration of the new exhibition at the Go for Broke National Education Center. I wasn't surprised by the long list of speakers from Buddhist and Christian backgrounds as I assumed there are lots of Buddhists and Christians among Japanese Americans, but I was rather astonished when an African American Imam appeared to speak on behalf of the Muslim community as I didn't know a single Muslim Japanese American personally. Now I see the relevance of comparing Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 on wartime relocation of individuals with Japanese ancestry based on "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership" to President Donald Trump's recent Executive Order banning travelers from six (originally seven) Muslim countries, but this was before the presidential election in November. I learned later that Mineta was strongly against racial profiling of Muslims in the US after 9.11 when there was a surge of prejudice and hate crimes against them. That was the apparent reason why an Imam was included.

I waited patiently until people dispersed after the ceremony as Mineta seemed enormously popular and surrounded by a huge crowd for quite a while. Finally it was my turn and I introduced myself as a journalist from Japan and asked that belated question of how he felt about Obama's visit to Hiroshima. He was very cordial in response and said "I'm pleased" twice in a soft, yet clear voice. Then he continued, "I was very, very pleased that he is the first sitting president to be able to visit Hiroshima. I know there have been a lot of people seeking an apology from President Obama on this occasion, but I think it is very hard trying to make a judgment for something that happened in 1945 using the lens of 2016. It was a difficult thing that they had to face at the time. So I wouldn't try a second guess for people on what they did at that time and I just commend President Obama for making this historic first visit to Hiroshima."

I also asked him if he thought Prime Minister Shinzo Abe should go to Pearl Harbor in return during his tenure, and he said, "Well, once again, that's a judgment he has to make. People criticize him for going to Yasukuni Shrine where war criminals are part of the worshiped and if he does that China, Korea and everybody else jump on him about it. Everybody makes his own decisions based on how they feel the impact would be in terms of international relations and international relations are not a one-day event. They are continuing. So people in politics have to make their own decisions and I would



*The historic site of Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist temple in Little Tokyo*

leave it up to each one of them to make that judgment."

Then he started asking me if I was born in the US and as soon as I mentioned that I was born near Tokyo, he told me his parents were from Shizuoka Prefecture. Then it was my turn to tell him that I used to teach at a University in Shizuoka and that brought us into a lively conversation for quite some time. Mineta told me about his annual visits to his relatives in Shizuoka and lamented that some of the Japanese words that he knows are regarded as outdated. He has a curious mind and seemed delighted when I mentioned that I spent most of my entire time in the US with a Japanese American family. Strangely enough for someone so distinguished, he sounded in a way much like the grandpa of the Japanese American family that I used to live with. I don't know what exactly, but there must be some kind of a bond among people who share the same ancestry and I felt very comfortable and enjoyed talking to him.

Later that year in December 2016 Abe did make a visit to Pearl Harbor with Obama and I'm sure Mineta was pleased about that too. But at that time, on a sunny Saturday morning in May, we didn't even have a clue who the next president of the US would be.

### Following the Path of Japanese Americans

When I first arrived in the US in the 1980s, I was a young student and saw myself as a temporary resident. I was/am Japanese and I thought I was going back to Japan eventually. So it felt puzzling at first when people asked me if I still have relatives in Japan, or people assumed I was one of the kids of the family I lived with as we were actually all close in age. This was several years before the Civil Liberties Act and nobody talked much about the incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII. I was too busy with my own life studying, hanging out with friends at school, and took no interest in the history of Japanese Americans then, even though grandpa had a prominent friend Henry Sugimoto who was a painter well known for his work documenting everyday life at the war relocation camps. Now I know that his works are in museums across the US and even in Japan, but there was no way of knowing his celebrity status at that



Photo: Author

The exterior of the Japanese American National Museum



Photo: Author

An exhibition of Japanese Internment Camps during WWII at the Japanese American National Museum

time mainly because grandpa never told me how good a painter he was. It's too bad I missed the chance of talking to the artist.

Grandpa and grandma didn't talk much about their experience at the camp in general, but the interesting thing is that grandpa, for some reason on a hot summer evening after dinner, talked about the day when the FBI came to escort him for interrogation. This tragic incident happened before FDR's Executive Order 9066, and even before Pearl Harbor, and he was detained for a few days to be interrogated because he had transferred a large sum of money (so he told me) in preparation to take his *Nisei* (second generation) wife and American-born family to Japan. The allegation was that this money was meant to help the Japanese government's war effort. He was released and returned home after a few days, but he always said, "You could hear a troop of cockroaches move around in the dark" with a big grin on his face. Grandma always reacted with a little shivering gesture and protested "Daddy, you told that story how many times to Junko? More than enough..." in Japanese. Grandma was a Santa Cruz-born *Nisei* and educated in English, but she was fluent in Japanese. Grandpa was originally from Kagoshima in Japan and he preferred speaking in Japanese even then. I had the privilege of hearing this story of the FBI and the cockroaches only because I speak the language whilst all of his grandchildren were not able to understand complicated stories like that in Japanese. And the story somehow remained in my head.

I went on to work at a museum in New York after finishing up my Master's and went back to Japan for a couple of years before I got another scholarship to study in Italy. By then, it was 1988 and the Civil Liberties Act was approved and both grandpa and grandma became the recipients of restitution payments. We talked every so often about the official apology from the US government and restitution when I visited them during these periods, but they seemed to care less about the situation and grandpa in particular said, "It is the Japanese government who started the war. I don't need the restitution money paid by the US government." I didn't know what to say to that.

Grandpa passed away while I was still living in Florence in 1990

and grandma has been gone for several years too now. But after I finished my studies of Baroque paintings in Italy and the art collection of King Charles I in England at Essex University and published several books on arts, culture and lifestyle, I started thinking about what grandpa said about WWII. He said to me once starkly, "It was good that Japan lost the war. That was the only inevitable way to end the atrocities committed by the Japanese Empire. Just imagine the world the other way around...what a horror it must have been." I wasn't sure if grandpa really meant it then, but now I'm pretty sure he meant it.

I have always had a feeling that grandpa was angry with the Japanese government over the war because his beloved younger brother, a brilliant young man who graduated from UC Berkeley in engineering *magna cum laude*, ended up lost in action (they couldn't find any remains) in the Philippines somewhere in the jungle because he was drafted by the Japanese government as soon as he went back to Japan to be with their parents. Grandpa must have felt guilty about his brother's loss of life until the time of his own death as his brother should have been able to survive as long as he remained with grandpa and his family.

Unfortunately, I can't talk to grandpa and grandma anymore, but with my recollection of grandpa's story of the day the FBI came, I am now determined to go to the National Archive in Washington and dig up the interrogation documents on that incident. He said to me that the file they brought out before they started interrogation was about a foot high and all his details were documented since the day he was born in Kagoshima. I would like to locate these documents, share the findings with the whole family and verify them as much as possible. That will be my next writing project and it seems relevant at the time of the presidency of Donald Trump.

**JS**

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