

A WASHINGTON PERSPECTIVE...

By Lou Cannon

The way from San Jose

When Norman Y. Mineta was mayor of San Jose, he initiated a series of neighborhood forums where citizens came with their questions and complaints. Mineta liked these forums, which gave him a sense of being able to do something directly for his constituents. When a citizen wanted a pothole paved or a city park better policed, Mineta usually had enough clout to get it done. Even under San Jose's "weak mayor" form of government, there usually were enough resources available at city hall to take care of the simpler problems.

Mineta is a congressman now, a freshman at a session where freshman Democratic House members are as plentiful as profanity on a Nixon tape. Despite the heady wine of participating in the most significant House structural changes in two generations, Mineta is learning that personal accomplishment is less easily achieved, or at least perceived, in the legislative branch of government.

Still, it is an exciting time to be in Washington, and Mineta has made the most of it. "You couldn't have picked a better time or place to be anywhere," Charles B. Rangel, a three-term Black Democrat from New York, told Mineta the other day. Mineta agrees. "What has made it exciting," he says, "is the changes that have occurred. I'm pleased to have been a part of it."

Using the quiet style of leadership he demonstrated in San Jose, Mineta has been making his mark. He was a key participant in the Democratic caucus decisions that gave the tired blood of the House seniority system a transfusion of fresh leadership. Now, he is one of the relatively few Democrats who is publicly expressing concern for the more disturbing aspects of the ballyhooed "reforms" that have accompanied the ascension of the Democratic caucus. Historically, the Democratic liberals took the lead in complaining about the closed-door decisions that featured the *ancien régime* of the senior, and frequently Southern, Democratic chairmen. Gradually, the liberals forced House committees to operate more openly and with more recorded votes. Most of these changes were accompanied by the usual rhetoric about the private business of the House also being the public's business.

Mineta wasn't around then. Now he is part of an ostensibly liberal caucus that has resurrected the proxy-voting device long favored by the Southern chairmen. The key decisions of the House are now made behind closed doors in the Democratic caucus as they once were made in, say, the House Armed Services Committee. And Democrats are bound to party positions on key questions in an extension of the discredited unit rule once detested by the liberals.

Mineta accepts the new House orthodoxy on proxy voting, using the rationale that he is a member of six subcommittees. Otherwise, he is skeptical. "I haven't seen or heard anything in these caucus discussions that requires a closed meeting," Mineta said. "Maybe we should close them for personnel discussions, but not when we're debating issues." When the House Democrats the other

day took a binding vote on Cambodian aid — in effect, the decision about what the House would do — Mineta met afterward with half a dozen like-minded freshmen and discussed prospective strategies for opening up the caucus.

Mineta and his wife May and their two sons have accepted Washington as their home — a transference that does not come easily to most Californians. Mineta and his 11-year-old like to spend their spare time visiting Civil War battlefields. His 4-year-old also is imbued with a sense of history; at the Lincoln Memorial, gazing at the granitic presence of America's greatest President, he asked his father, "Daddy, can I sit in his lap?"

Mineta enjoys telling this story. He likes, too, his place in Congress, where he is gradually making the discovery that working in the legislative branch can be as satisfying, if more anonymous, than presiding over one of California's major cities. This month he will hold three public forums in his district, even as he did when he was mayor of San Jose.

Paul R. Haerle, the California Republican chairman who once was Ronald Reagan's appointments secretary, has managed the tricky combination of endearing himself both to the Ford administration and to increasingly estranged GOP conservatives.

The conservatives liked what they saw of Haerle at the Republican National Committee meeting in Washington last month. He sided with them in an unsubstantive but highly symbolic debate on a rule interpretation aimed at opening up the GOP to minorities, young people and women through "positive action" efforts. To conservatives, positive action in even its mildest form smacks of the hated "quota system" of the McGovern Democrats. The issue almost evenly divided the National Committee, a body that invariably prefers meaningless unity to principled division. Haerle succeeded in writing the compromise that did the least damage to this imagined unity, even though he personally thought the entire "positive action" approach was posturing.

"Breast-beating resolutions don't have anything to do with broadening the base of the party," he said after the nearly unanimous vote in behalf of the compromise. "You can only do that with aggressive leadership and intelligent, articulate candidates." Foremost among these candidates, Haerle seems to believe, is the Republican President of the United States. Publicly, he expressed the view that Gerald Ford was doing well and would do better. Privately, he convinced key strategists in the Ford administration that he is in the President's corner and not Reagan's in any showdown fight for the presidential nomination.

State chairmen do not deliver votes in California, of course. Nevertheless, Haerle's ungrudging support for Ford has encouraged White House advisers to believe that Reagan's putative candidacy is, at this moment, more talk than anything else. The President has real problems in a few Southern states and New Hampshire but, without California, the conservatives who dream of derailing Ford within his own party simply have no chance.



Norman
Mineta



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— Clark Kerr