Interview with Congressman Michael Honda
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Interviewer: Ronald Sarasin, President, United States Capitol Historical Society

Ronald Sarasin: Hello, I'm Ron Sarasin, President of the United States Capitol Historical Society, and this is another edition of Yielding the Floor, our series of interviews with Members of the United States Congress. Our guest today is Michael Makoto Honda who has represented the 15th Congressional District of California in the United States House of Representatives since 2001. His diverse district includes Silicon Valley, the birthplace of technology and innovation. Although Mike Honda was born in California in 1941 he spent his early years in an internment camp in Colorado in World War Two. His family returned to California in 1953. In 1965 Honda interrupted his college studies to serve two years in the Peace Corps in El Salvador. Returning with a passion for teaching, he earned his bachelor's degrees in biological sciences and Spanish and a master's degree in education from San Jose State University. In his decades-long career as an educator, Honda was a science teacher, served as principal at two public schools, and conducted educational research at Stanford University. In 1971 he was appointed by then Mayor Norm Mineta to San Jose's planning commission. In 1981 he won his first election, gaining a seat on the San Jose unified school board. Honda also served on the county board of supervisors and in the California State Assembly from 1996 to 2000. Honda was elected to the United States House as a Democrat in 2000. From 2001 to 2006 he served as a member of the science Committee and the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. In 2007 he was appointed to the very influential Appropriations Committee. Mike Honda is serving his second term as Chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus and in January 2007 he was named House Democrat Senior Whip. We are pleased today to welcome Mike Honda to this program.

Congressman Michael Honda: Thank you, good to be here.

RS: In our first interview in the 'Yielding the Floor' series, Tom Foley and Bob Michel spoke about how moved they were when they first

went on the floor and raised their right hand and took the oath of office. What are your recollections of that moment?

MH: Before being in the chamber, I remember the night before seeing the dome light up and that was impressive and thinking about being under the dome with the rest of my colleagues was something I was anticipating, but I didn't know how profound that feeling would have been. And you know taking the oath, I just wish my father was here.

RS: Many members recall that a senior member of perhaps a group of members take them under their wing to mentor them in their early years. Did you have any mentors?

MH: A couple of them—those who were holding office—were people like Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) and Anna Eshoo (D-CA) and those who used to hold office; folks like Norm Mineta, they're the ones I sort of lean towards to get some insights and some feedback, but on top of that I had a good staff that was tight and worked together well, learning together. So it was an adventure and I think the first person I sort of gravitated to as member of my freshman class was folks like Jim Langevin (D-RI), we hung out together, him in his chair and me walking right behind him.

INTERNMENT DURING WORLD WAR II

RS: You were born in California in 1941 and like former Congressman Norm Mineta and Robert Matsui, you and your family were interned during World War Two. How has that experience impacted your life and your career?

MH: It's probably the main strand through all the things I've done since I was a young adult. When I started to realize and understand the full impact of the complex experience and being the--being taken from their homes and being relocated to camps--understanding that the government sometimes will make mistakes, sometimes on purpose, sometimes just because of the situation, circumstances like World War Two. Those kinds of experiences have been energizing and the key for me was turning that energy that was negative and anger into a positive one, one of participatory activities that would

make me part of a solution rather than be part of a problem and be constantly angry, and that was the source of energy that I would draw from all the time.

RS: How old were you when you were first…

MH : I was … I was an infant. I was born June 27th Forty-One--Pearl Harbor happened in December 7th--February 19th around 42, so I wasn't much more eight months and at that time you know when I look back upon it I kept thinking to myself how could I have been a national security risk with, just wearing a diaper, but I guess if you see my diaper, might've been a different question. (Laughter)

EDUCATION

RS: Education has also been an important part of your life and you earned a master's degree from San Jose State and taught science and then served as principal at two different schools and how has that impacted what your doing today?

MH : You know when I was going through college, I started to reflect on my life and all the things that impacted my life and one of them was TV. On television and you know when you grow up with TV they have families and images there that doesn't reflect the family I came from and so there was always this comparison between my family and the Nelson Family? Asking myself how come my father doesn't talk to me like Ricky Nelson's father talks to him and that sort of builds an interesting sense of values or something that impacts your self esteem where nothing out there tells you that you're important or your apart of the mainstream. And understanding that starts putting it in its proper prospective. Becoming a teacher became very important to teach youngsters that they have value. Their parents come from some place, their name means something, their language means something, all those things they bring to school has value and then as a teacher its our job to value and then as a teacher its our job to value that so that the youngsters grow strong and healthy and intact so that became very much part of my effort to be a teacher to be a researcher and understanding the history of this country and the things we've done to each other in this country how that plays out in who we are and how we feel about ourselves as a community, as

individuals, then how do we become part of this country, a positive factor. So the pathway to teaching was one of the most positive ways that I found that was reassuring to me, provided me growth and also provided me a way to share what I understood the best and that's how we grow up and how we can grow up healthy.

RS: Is that the kind of research you did at Stanford? What was the basis of that?

MH: The research of Stanford was developing the coalition between teachers and parents to help youngsters perform better if they had more money from the federal government and we found that more money is not the key, the key thing for children's achievement was the fact that parents and teachers worked together and the children knew it wand that became a key ingredient in insight that we had in terms of teacher participation parent training, and understanding how children learn or what motivates them so that the idea there's no space between my teacher, my parents, about me.

PEACE CORPS

RS: You interrupted your education by going to the Peace Corps and then going back to school afterwards. Why did you do that? What was important about the Peace Corps?

MH: I spoke a little bit about self-esteem and the kind of person I was going up and that process of understanding myself was going on while I was going to college and that made me a very undisciplined student I got A's and F's. And my GPA wasn't the best and I also had a sense that I needed to grow up. I always felt that what I had to say was not important, that other people were more sophisticated and things. It was an issue of self esteem and I just knew I wasn't ready to graduate from college and go out into the larger world so I dropped out of school and joined the Peace Corps. I thought that Peace Corps would be a way of leaving this country, being in a different environment and I really didn't know what to expect that; I wanted to go to a Latin American Country that nobody knew about and I found El Salvadore that happened to be a country that was inviting Peace Corps members. So I was accepted and I went to training; Peace Corps training in Puetro Rico and what they did for us during training

was they pushed us both mental, physical and emotional and we found that we had more than what we thought our limits were. And so that helped one understand that there's strength in me that I didn't know existed. Also made me understand that to make a commitment you keep it. And I was sick I had dysentery for a week, I lost weight, but I was boundly determined not to leave even if I was going to die. That taught me commitment and then being in a country that was so poor, it was sad in one way, but it was interesting to see families who were poor, but still loved each other and worshiped with each other and created a community in spite of all of their other trappings of poverty; that children were still important, family was important. Church was important and government was not a whole participant in this whole thing and seeing that generosity in a community that was so poor taught me humility and I guess a certain kind of generosity and then their wonderful esteem for the United States. And when I came to my town they said "the Gringo's here" and they all went past me looking for a blonde-haired, blued-eyed tall guy. There was just this young kid who looked like a Chinese guy but once they listened to me speak Spanish; yeah, he is an American. You know, so it was a way of telling me I have a function and I have a story that's very uniquely American and they started to understand. They started to get it that *Bonanza* doesn't necessarily represent America-- the movie—the series—*The Fugitive* doesn't necessarily reflect American. I its just; that's American and I think that when I came home I had a very deep sense of understanding and I could see things in this country that needed to be done and no matter how great of a country we are, I think Benjamin Franklin used to say: "How can a country so wonderful have so many faults." And this we are, you know, we are a country that's a wonderful country, with wonderful promises, that we need to keep and I think that prepared me to be in Congress because that whole phrase and preamble of the Constitution, in order to form a more perfect union became the core mission for people like myself and to engage people and tell people that they all have value. So when I came home I was prepared to be a student. I was disciplined, I had a goal, I had a mission, I had an understanding that finishing school was not the end; it's just the beginning and education then is a lifelong process and learning and I'm still learning here, and like I've said before, this is the greatest job I've ever had.

ENTERING POLITICS

RS: How did you then get from education into politics? What moved you from one field to the other?

MH:
In my book, education is politics. (Laughter) Being in a family is politics. Being a firstborn male, Asian, is politics. It's where my placement in the family is. That's all politics. We learn how to behave in the context of other people. We behave certain ways with our parents, our friends, our grandparents. Education is the same thing. We teach youngsters what's appropriate behavior in schools and we try to be parent's partners in the children's social development and be the parent's primary partners in the children's primary and formal education. So working with parents, with your colleagues, and with youngsters, and the administration, that's all about working with people for the benefit of the child. And politics is working for the constituents. But moving through the milieu of different issues for the benefits of the shareholders that are our citizens; so that's pretty much the same thing for me.

RS: I was once escorting a group of Irish educators through the Capitol and ran into Roy Blunt, the Republican--had been, or still is--the Republican whip and introduced him as another educator—he'd been a college professor and president—he'd said he had gotten tired of politics so he ran for Congress. (Laughter)

MH: That's pretty blunt. (Laughter)

RS: True. Now you ran for Congress in 2000 and what made you decide to do that, what do you remember about that first campaign, and has your experience in campaigning changed over the several opportunities you've had to run for office at the federal level?

MH: Actually I had to be recruited to run, because I was pretty happy to be at the state assembly working on public education on the state level and having my eye on the Senate to continue that work in the state of California in public education. Then I started getting recruited heavily by Zoe Lofgren, Anna Eshoo, Nancy Pelosi, Patrick Kennedy and they pushed pretty hard and they worked with my wife (Laughter)

and, my wife finally told me that you ought to do this because your friends are asking you. And if you don't want to be on their bad list, this is a good thing to do, you can still do your education thing. So she gave me permission to run. It was a thirteenth month stint and it was the toughest thirteen months I've ever been through. Learned a lot about myself; I hated debates, because its not my venue., you know, because I'm a school teacher and when your asked a question you are supposed to answer quickly and precisely and concisely and I like to talk about the issue first and then answer. It was tough, it was tough.

RS: Has that changed in the several opportunities you've had to run again for reelection? Did it get any easier?

MH: I'm not sure that I've become more concise. (Laughter) I think that's why they call the congressional minute the longest minute in the world. But I have learned one thing; that being in this job is probably the best job I have ever had, because it provides me the greatest opportunity to be involved in almost every issue one can think of that's important to our families, the individuals, both domestically and internationally, and how to work with people and staff to extract information as quickly as possible, digest it, and come up with a position based upon my values, my principles, and my history. So there isn't a job that's as comprehensive as this and as impactful as this—even though I'm one of 534 people, it's really a privilege to be here. And the privilege is this: that all of us come from different backgrounds and history and experiences, and those of us that remember what we've learned what we've realized, what we've lost, in terms of language, culture, history and things like that. If we remember those things when we think about policy, we can convert our private lives into public policy. And when we do that, we've engaged other people who may have had the same background experience and to capture that makes public policy making more precise and elegant.

CONGRESSIONAL ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN CAUCUS

RS: You are currently serving your second term as Chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus. What can you tell us

about the caucus and your experience with it and what the Caucus is trying to accomplish?

MH: That's a good question. When Norm Mineta was a member of Congress he started this caucus along with Bob Matsui and it was an effort to pull together Asian-Americans who were in Congress and congress folks who represent a population that has a critical amount of Asian-American constituents. And the purpose is to be able to represent some the unique needs and perspectives that Asian-American communities have—historically and those who are newcomers. Because there are things we know and understand as a community that needs to be blended into the greater process of policy making and advocacy. This past couple of years we've made KPAC—the Congressional Asian-Pacific American Caucus—a truly a functioning caucus because now we are dues paying and we have a professional staff and we are on par with the other caucuses, like the congressional black caucus, Hispanic caucus, and it's our goal to work with them also on common interests. And one of them is working at the health disparities that exist for all of our populations based on ethnicity, language and isolation of communities. Because all of bring to the floor, bring to the table, the perspectives from different parts of this country where our communities live. You can't expect someone who doesn't have that background to fully understand or fully appreciate what is going on, so it is our responsibility to bring those issues forward. And again, it's like what I said previously, that it is our private lives that we converted to public policy and make that policy more engaged and precise, that's our effort; to be part of that whole political process and lawmaking process, and Asian-American have a piece in that. It's to be a voice also. I started the Ethiopian Caucus because they said they wanted to be participatory and wanted a voice, then coming from my background and the Japanese-American experience where, knowing what happens when you don't have a voice in Congress, I said that I would be pleased to help start that, and we have other members of Congress who are part of that process. You know, I've gained a greater insight of that community and the Diaspora of Ethiopians, so that it helps me to understand and think deeper and clearer about the Asian-American Diaspora here and our value in our country in the context of globalization and trade and, you know, foreign diplomacy.

It's been an invaluable experience and KPAC has been invaluable in providing me that insight.

RS: Do the several groups exist in the Congress help keep citizens apart or to they help to bring them together? I mean, if you have Black Caucus and a Hispanic Caucus and an Asian Caucus and an Ethiopian Caucus and an Irish Caucus and it goes on and on, how does that bring people together?

MH: It provides a podium for the communities to go to. You mentioned Irish Caucus, it provide the Irish community who have distinct issues, especially in the recent past. Back in '86 they had issues around being undocumented and they were able to get their issues known here in Congress and so when Reagan signed the Amnesty Bill for the undocumented, that community was one of the major communities that was impacted. So it's not about separation, but it's about providing a voice at the podium. And then when we developed our tri-caucus—the Black Caucus, the Hispanic Caucus, the Asian Caucus, we have the Native American folks along with us—it provides us a leverage for us when we have over seventy members who can speak with one voice on an issue, such as health disparities, such as voting rights acts, such as education, you know, things like that that we have in common. And we can bring our perspective to the table along with the other members. So it's a very positive, unifying process. And we say democracy is participatory. And so we add that element of participation for the communities too.

NATIONAL SECURITY AND CIVIL RIGHTS

RS: You talked about domestic and international concerns and one of the most important issues facing the country today is security--national security—and at the same time, protecting civil rights.

MH: Sure.

RS: As someone whose civil rights were violated in the 1940s, when you were interned with other Japanese-American families, what's your perspective on the current situation?

MH: Let me go back to our camp experience, you know, when people put us in camp and used the excuse it was national security and when Congress and the Japanese-American community decided to pursue an apology from this government for the setting aside of our constitutional right, we had to debate among ourselves whether this was appropriate or not. And after two years of debate, we decided this was something we needed to do. And we engaged members of Congress like Norm Mineta, Bob Matsui, Noah(?), Akaka, Stark, Meek, and because they understood that background and that experience, they were able to provide some leadership and incentive for other members to become involved in studying why it happened. And through the Wartime Relocation Commission, we found that the reason why World War II internment happens because of racial prejudice, war hysteria, and the failure of political leadership. And part of that failure of political leadership is understanding what truly national security means and what people's personal security means. And when 9/11 happened, the issue of security came back up again. But we knew because of our experiences that you don't set aside people's civil liberties in order to attain this national sense of security. I think it was Benjamin Franklin that said that those who are willing to give up a little bit of privacy and personal liberties for a little bit of security, deserves neither. And I think that that's what drove our community to be upfront in leading the way in saying, "you don't give up your civil liberties to acquire some security, national security. You can do both." And that's what makes this country so different from other countries is that effort to provide that balance and that promise. And the preamble of the Constitution ends with "in order to form a more perfect union;" and that's our struggle, that's our mission. And I think that as a congressperson, as one of 534, that has to be our core mission and we have to model that, no matter how difficult and how scary it is, that's our mandate.

RS: Are we getting there? Are we forming "a more perfect union"?

MH: I think we are. Even through the hard times of the last six years, where, I think, we went the wrong direction, the political process allows people to learn from our mistakes. For many people it's a critical mistake because people lose their lives, but in that process, you know, our country is able to make its adjustment and I think November 7, the people said "we want a different direction." And

that's the struggle that the Democratic leadership has today. We have that responsibility, but we also understand the responsibility to govern and bring everybody together in spite of our differences in how we see things. We need to move that ship together and not fracture our ship and that's both parties and all three parts of our branches of government on behalf of the people that we represent. And that's both the challenge and the beauty and the burden of this democracy.

THOUGHTS ON PARTISANSHIP

RS: Let me shift gears a little bit. In their recent book, *The Broken Branch*, veteran Congressional scholars Tom Mann and Norm Ornstein argue that increasing partisanship in Congress has undermined both public confidence in the institution as well as its own ability to perform its constitutional role. Have you noticed signs of increasing or decreasing partisanship during your four-plus terms and what solutions would you suggest, if you see it as a problem?

MH: Good question. I wasn't here when the Democrats were in power and I wasn't here when the Republicans had control of Congress and the White House was a Democrat. I was a constituent and I saw the differences and behavior of parties and issues being split along party lines. And a lot of the folk I knew and respected were leaving Congress because "collegiality was gone," they say. It was no more fun to be able to debate very heatedly and after your debate you get together with your colleagues from the other side of the issue and socialize. And that "professionalism" had left I guess in the early 90s. When Nancy Pelosi took over she said that she wanted us to mend fences and to govern, really govern, and that means the responsibility of engaging people from all sides of issues, not only in our own party, but in the other parties and I think that's what people expect us to do; to govern and govern based upon the needs of our people rather than ideology—that tends to separate us—and find that common ground. And I think that we're making a very concerted effort to move that way and it's my hope that we do that. I think that a danger in party politics, where you have separations of power, when one party rules all aspects of our government and they don't allow for debate, then it creates a situation where the lack of debate makes the outcomes less perfect. And I

think that what I've learned in my observation is that you always need that dissent, the disagreement, because this country is so wide and varied that there is no way we can have consensus without listening to each other. And I think that is what people expect us to do.

RS: Do you see that getting better in the time you've been here? Do you see an attempt, at least, of people trying to listen?

MH: Yes. Yes. On both sides. On both sides. And I think that people are having this humor coming back also. It's going to be slow to let go, but I think it's going to be more comfortable to be able to collegially debating issues, things like that.

RS: Does the schedule encourage that? I mean the old days of member socializing after the session and now you are in session until midnight or later, you members, many members weekends are back home in their district, they don't have a chance to socialize with other members on a weekend and their families. Is there any way to improve that, to get people to get to know each other a little bit?

MH: Yes, I think the last session where we were here, probably two and a half days, and people went back to their districts and people were not encourage to engage each other. It was…rather sterile. Today right now we are working four to five days a week, but it's a schedule required for us to catch up with the oversights taking place lately over the past few years so that is driving my schedule right now. I think that in a few months, when we have gone through one cycle, that we are able to perhaps create a schedule that is perhaps more family friendly, because I really feel for families that have young children where the parents, either the mom or the dad, are moving back and forth all of the time. We need to figure out a schedule that going to be amenable for us to work and be productive here but at the same time provide them an opportunity to be with their children and then in their districts. So it's a balancing act and I don't think that people in this country really appreciate the difficulties that members of Congress have here, especially the ones that have to travel long distances or those who have to be away from their children. It's a sacrifice, I think. I'm at a point in my life, I'm in the second half or third, the last third (Laughter), where my children are grown, but I see

a good majority of the folks who have young children and it's got to be tough.

RS: You talked about the ability to engage in debate and then get together and socialize. Your experience may have been like mine, I always felt I had an advantage being, having been in the State Legislature where we would yell and scream and fight for principle and then go to dinner with the people on the other side of the aisle because they became your friends. You may argue politically, or philosophically, but you like them as people. And you listen because you like them. And I think that, today I think that is what's lost. They don't listen, some members don't even want to listen, they don't want to know the people on the other side of the aisle and I think that's unfortunate. What is your thought or experience with that?

MH: Well, I'll go back to my days in the California State Assembly where my fishing buddy was very conservative Republican Senator. But he'd finish his session early, he'd come over to our side, wait for me in front of the chambers and say (points to "watch" and makes casting motion with hands) (Laughter). And he would have to wait for me to get off of the floor and then we would go off in the early evening and go bass fishing. And we never talked politics, we never talked religion; we talked about "where do you want go get some milkshake before we go in the water" you know and just have a good time. It's a way of creating a relationship which, in the ensuing years, became helpful because I had a real good education bill and I needed four Republican Senators and I went to my fishing buddy. I said "I need your help. It's a good bill. It's good for teachers, it's good for kids." He said "Well I'll help you, I'll hold my nose and help you." I said, "no, you don't understand. I need three more of you." And three of them came into their cloakroom and he called them over and explained to them, he said "okay, if you ask us, we'll do it." We got it through. And because of that, you know, teachers have a better benefits and something to work for in their profession where teachers don't have a great salary, but at least they have something to look forward to in their retirement.

RS: One of the ways people are brought together in the Congress is when they travel together. Do they do enough of that? Or are they

afraid of being accused of an adjunct, or being an adjunct, so that they are reluctant to travel together?

MH: I think the…what had happened in the last session that had brought negative light to travel was unfortunate. And I think that travel *is* important for members of Congress, because if you don't know the subject matter and you haven't been there it is difficult to come up with good policy or think deeper on issues or understanding another country or another group of people that you may be deciding on in terms of laws or trade and things like that. When you lack that information and a relationship, your policies are not as precise as on target, on focused as they could be or should be. I'm a great proponent of travel with your colleagues to get to know them and you hear them talking, you hear their ideas outside of the chambers "in situ," we would say, in the situation, you know, I think that's important because it helps listen to each other. And travel is like in teaching; it's like field trips. There is value in it, that's sometimes intangible, but necessary to have in order to come up with a good decision.

LEGACY

RS: