

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN AMERICAN?

AN ONLINE CURRICULUM PRODUCED BY THE MINETA LEGACY PROJECT WITH THE STANFORD PROGRAM ON INTERNATIONAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION (SPICE)

AVAILABLE AT

WWW.WHATDOESITMEANTOBEANAMERICAN.COM

REVIEWED BY BRUCE STUBBLEFIELD

The Mineta Legacy Project and Stanford's SPICE curriculum collaboration, *What Does It Mean to Be an American?* is an ambitious and sleek set of lessons designed to educate high school and collegiate users on its namesake. The curriculum is the offspring of The Mineta Legacy Project, which was created to honor the work of Norman Mineta (Democrat), who broke barrier after barrier for Asian-Americans by becoming the first Asian-American to serve as a mayor of a major US city, the first Asian-American from the "lower" forty-eight states elected to serve in Congress (for over twenty years), the first Asian-American to serve in an American president's cabinet—Democrat Bill Clinton's administration—and then make further history by being the first Asian-American to serve in a Republican presidential administration, George W. Bush's cabinet. A one-hour documentary on Norman Mineta's life was produced by the Mineta Legacy Project with filmmakers at Bridge Media, *Norman Mineta and His Legacy: An American Story*. The complete documentary is not included in *What Does it Mean to be an American?* (or required to use the curriculum) but is available for a modest charge.¹ The filmmakers invited SPICE to create a companion curriculum that became much more extensive and complex than a curriculum exclusively focusing upon the trials, tribulations, and ultimate outstanding achievements of Mineta, a great American.

As a result, the curriculum is not a resource primarily focused upon Asian studies education since a substantial number of videos, activities, and readings are dedicated to historical and contemporary depictions of US civic engagement, as well as historical and contemporary perspectives regarding six key themes: Immigration, Civil Liberties and Equity, Civic Engagement, Justice and Reconciliation, Leadership, and US–Japan Relations.

Immigration, the perspectives of high school students with multiple ethnic and cultural backgrounds, content on civil rights and violations of civil liberties, examples of and calls for student activism, and the story of the World War II Japanese-American internment and that community's justifiably successful fight for official federal government recognition (attained by President Ronald Reagan signing the 1988 Civil Liberties Act that included reparations) receive much more attention than the historical and contemporary US–Japan Relations theme.

The professionalism in terms of curriculum design of the 2021 Franklin R. Buchanan Prizewinner is impressive. The website is both technically and aesthetically well-designed. Each of the six lessons can be downloaded in student and teacher versions, printed, or shared to a learning management system of choice. The number of videos (most short, but well produced) included in the package is immense, and twenty-nine are included in the YouTube segment of the package. Some of the best videos involve Norman Mineta and outstanding examples include "A Family Immigration Story: The Minetas," "The Fight for Justice," and "Bridging Two Countries: Norman Y. Mineta." More examples of content include a reading on the history of US–Japan Relations, written by a prominent Stanford historian;

interviews with ethnically and culturally heterogenous teenagers on their life experiences; and lessons and activities on the aforementioned themes, with special emphasis on civic engagement activities that feature high school and college students as well as related historical content featuring successful change agents.

Despite its superb design, and some excellent content and resources, *What Does It Mean to Be an American?* is much more of a civic education curriculum than one that focuses on Asia. Although the package certainly contains useful content, a plausible case can be made that much of the curriculum package is simply too diffuse to substantially advance American student understanding of Asia, given its lack of focus upon root Asian cultures.² A quick search on lessons of similar topics not directly related to learning about Asia but more about civics, and especially violations of civil liberties, will yield similar lessons from a variety of different sources, such as the *Mikva Challenge*, *iCivics*, or the *Congressional Medal of Honor Society's Character Development Program*.³ Additionally, many of the non-Asia-related material in this digital curriculum package seem crafted to adhere to the current zeitgeist or further controversial discourse on social justice and activism that probably deserve alternative perspectives or especially in contemporary examples, data to complement young people's possibly legitimate, but emotional perspectives. Content is presented but is relatively modest in encouraging debate and discussion about such topics as the achievements of America in extending or correcting past discrimination, epitomized by Norman Mineta's rhetorical and admiring question from the end of "The Fight for Justice": *How many countries' governments admit a past wrong they've done, admit it, and then correct it?*⁴

When invited to contribute this essay, I read the specifications of the Franklin R. Buchanan Prize, and the submission is supposed to contribute pedagogical, instructional, or curriculum material on Asia for K–12 and/or undergraduates.⁵ This year's submission seems only to address part of this charge. Four of the six lessons include either a video, a case study, or an extension activity related to Japanese-American incarceration during World War II, Norman Mineta, Fred Korematsu, or the Japanese-American Redress Movement. But in some of these cases, the video or activity is not the focal point of the lesson, but merely a lens through which students, who perhaps lack basic contextual knowledge about recent immigration, learn more about the historical problems of Japanese-Americans and become more activist citizens in other situations unrelated to Japanese-Americans.

Certainly, each of these videos and student activities are clearly presented and easy to use in various classrooms, such as government and civics, US history, or another social studies-related discipline. That said, it isn't until Key Issue 6, "US–Japan Relations," where users get an entire lesson centered around a broad, Asia-related topic.

In general, Stanford Professor Emeritus (History) Peter Duus's essay included in the section is quite well done, especially the utilization of the Pendulum Swing metaphor in explaining the historic relationship. Still, high school students in particular need more understanding of Imperial Japanese World War II actions. For example, to fully understand a clause like the following that appeared in the section on World War II, "... and the [American] press reported that the Japanese were especially cruel in their treatment of the Chinese people," students would need to know the American press was factually correct about this assertion. For more on this topic, read Haruko and Theodore Cook's *Japan at War: An Oral History*.⁶

It is particularly important that US high school students learn more about World War II, including the Pacific War. Roughly, only 30 percent of my current seniors could name all three of the major belligerents of World War II. Italy is mostly commonly replaced with the Soviet Union (or Russia as some students indicate). Furthermore, China is also

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identified often as an Axis power as well. At least one major national study indicates a basic knowledge of World War II on the part of young people is the exception and not the rule.⁷

Also, if American teenagers lack rudimentary knowledge about historical and contemporary discrimination on the part of other countries against people based upon ethnicity or gender, their viewpoints of the US and Japan will be distorted. To cite two examples from Japan, a 2020 World Economic Forum ranked Japan 121st out of 153 countries in hiring women for management positions in large companies. The US by comparison ranked fifty-third. Japan has made little progress for decades even though a high percentage of Japanese women are university graduates. A 2017 Reuters report on the Japanese government's Ministry of Justice survey indicated that almost 40 percent of foreign residents who sought housing in Japan were turned down and almost one quarter of foreign residents were denied jobs in the past five years. The point of these examples is not to bash Japan since like the US, Japan is a leader in human rights for its residents, but as a cautionary note that teenagers need to learn about the Pacific War, and human rights interest in both countries. "Compared to What?" almost always stimulates critical thinking.

What Does It Mean to Be an American? is a beautifully designed curriculum intended to teach civics, social justice, Japanese-American history, and Norman Mineta's biography. However, because its creators try to do all these in six lessons, the curriculum certainly has impressive elements, but its sheer size and lack of focus upon learning about root Asian cultures should be noted. On the other hand, the curriculum contains some excellent resources and is free for students and educators.

NOTES

1. For more information about the film, visit <http://minetalegacyproject.com>.
2. "Buchanan Prize," *Association for Asian Studies*, April 07, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4mf98xn9>
3. See "Home," *Mikva Challenge*, www.mikvachallenge.org/; "Home," *iCivics*, <https://www.icivics.org/>; and "Medal of Honor Character Development Program Overview: CMOHS," *Congressional Medal of Honor Society*, <https://www.cmohs.org/lessons/overview>.
4. See "The Fight for Justice" at <https://youtu.be/K7iypNfLjDg>.
5. "Buchanan Prize," *Association for Asian Studies*.
6. Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook, *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: New Press, 1993).
7. In 2018, the then-Princeton University Woodrow Wilson National Fellowships Foundation Center took the history and civic examination immigrants must pass to become American citizens and administered questions from the test pool to 1,000 randomly selected Americans. Survey data indicated that American adults are ignorant of the most basic information about history, including wars and other armed conflicts. In the Princeton study, 60 percent of US adults surveyed were ignorant of which countries the US fought in World War II. Furthermore, respondents under forty-five years old were over three times less likely to know these rudimentary facts when compared with respondents sixty-five years old or higher.



BRUCE STUBBLEFIELD earned a Bachelor's degree from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and has over nine years of teaching experience. He currently teaches IB History of the Americas, and Economics at Ooltewah High School in Ooltewah, Tennessee. He previously taught US History (11-12th Grade), as well as Tennessee Statewide Dual Enrollment American History II. Stubblefield is an alumni of the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia programs in Tennessee.