

Interview with Doris O. Matsui
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Interviewer, Ronald Sarasin

Introduction by Ronald Sarasin, President of the United States Capitol Historical Society

Welcome to the latest interview in the United States Capitol Historical Society's series of oral history interviews. My name is Ron Sarasin; I'm a Former Member of Congress from Connecticut and the President of the U.S. Capitol Historical Society.

This interview with Representative Doris Matsui is the final interview in our series featuring Asian Pacific American Members of Congress. In these interviews, Current and Former Members have relived their memories of people, places, and events that have shaped their public careers. It is our hope that these recollections will provide listeners with a deeper appreciation for the human dimension of representative government in this temple of liberty we know as the United States Capitol.

On March 10th, 2005, Doris Matsui was sworn in as the Member of Congress to represent California's Fifth Congressional District. Congresswoman Matsui was elected to the seat in a special election following the death of the incumbent congressman, her husband, Robert Matsui.

Congresswoman Matsui has long been involved in public affairs and politics. Prior to her election she had worked for numerous local, national, and international organizations, including serving as an official in the White House during the Clinton Administration. Representative Matsui currently serves on two prestigious House committees: the Rules Committee and the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

Ron Sarasin: Welcome. In our earlier interviews in this series we, others have spoken about how moved they were when they first walked onto the house floor. Can you tell us what your thoughts were when you walked on the floor that day?

Congresswoman Matsui: Well, as you know, this was a special election and I ran for the seat when my husband passed away. So,

for me, it was a little bit different than for most people I believe. Bob was a member of the house for twenty six years and he loved the institution. And I had always been affiliated with it, and understood it, but not really understanding what it really meant until the day when I was sworn into office. Actually it was three years ago today, as you mentioned, March 10. And what happened was very much as you know, the house floor isn't filled very often, but this particular day everyone was there, mostly I believe because they knew me, but they also honored Bob, very much honored Bob, and they felt that they should be there. So when I went to the well of the house and got sworn in and made my so called one minute, which was more than one minute, you know as those things, are I was filled with a great sense of honor, humility, and I also felt too some sense of poignancy because my son was there with his daughter Anna who was at that time sixteen months, and Bob was supposed to be there, two weeks, two months before, being sworn in, and the man swearing in as they always do, and he wanted Anna to be there. Well he couldn't be there, and it was my swearing in that Anna and Brian attended. And it was somewhat, in a sense, I wouldn't say overwhelming but being in the chamber, looking at my friends in the gallery, and seeing many of my friends, cause I knew most of the people in the house, in the chamber, I felt very much to a certain degree Bob was there, and to a certain degree I was coming home, and I reflected that twenty six years before, Bob was being sworn in as a very young man, with our son who was six at the time, and so it was somewhat to me poignant and yet very gratifying that I could be there, and it was something that I will always remember.

Ron Sarasin: It must have been a very difficult decision, to make the decision, to run for that seat after your husband had died. What went into that? And why did you decide to do it?

Congresswoman Matsui: Well, Bob wasn't ill very long, but he took a turn, you might say, he wasn't supposed to die, lets put it that way. And, it was that Christmas week when he got ill, which we thought he was going to be fine, it didn't turn out to be that way. He brought it up to me, because he didn't expect it to be so soon, to happen this quickly or even planed on it at all that he was concerned about the district, and he said you know you ought to think about running. And I said, ooh, that's wasn't anything that I've ever thought about. And he looked at me, and said you know what it has to be your decision, and you have to, you have to make that decision. And I really felt grateful that he said that to me because in a sense it freed me, I didn't feel like I had to do it. He passed away on January 1st of 2005; the first

day of the year. And you know we were just so involved in planning the memorial services, and the funeral, and taking him back home to Sacramento, I didn't think about this at all, until about the middle of the week when people started mentioning the fact that they really wanted me to run, and I said, I can't think about it now, please let me at least get through the end of the week, so at least it will be a week after he's passed away. And I thought I could let even go in time, another week or so after that, and they said no you can't, you really have to think about this. So I said ok, after I went through all the services, we flew him back to Sacramento and had his funeral, then I could think about it, and that's what I did. I mean he died on the first and had the funeral on the eighth, with intervening services in between, and at that time I got together with my family and we talked about it, and I had decide I felt quickly, that Sacramento is a wonderful place, my experience of Sacramento is all the community, and the fact that I started there as a young married person, Bob brought me back home as his young bride, and we started our married life there, the Matsui family had been there since the 1890's; so its home. But it's also, if you know Sacramento, a political town too. The capital is there, and so it's a place where people started thinking and my friends really believed, my friends here, and my friends at home, that I had to decide quickly, because this seat had been occupied with Bob for 26 years and prior to that --you might have known John Moss--he held the seat for 26 years. So, for about 52 years there were two people occupying the seat, so this was an opportunity. But we worked very, very hard and I decided I would run, and that I felt that it was important for me to run for this seat there were many things that priorities that Bob thought were important that I thought I could be helpful with understanding Sacramento, and also understanding Washington. So I decided to run, it was a very fast campaign, special election, essentially two months is what it was, and it was something where you start from a standing start to a full fledged run. It was incredible, it was incredible.

Ron Sarasin: I'm sure it was. What was the transition like from being a Congressional spouse, to becoming a member of Congress? And obviously you had been active for many years in your own political life, not as an elected member, but do you feel that all of those experiences prepared you?

Congresswoman Matsui: Yes I do feel that all of those experiences prepared me because to a certain degree I knew the landscape and I knew the people both in Sacramento and here, but I had a different role. Until I really assumed the role as a member of Congress I really

didn't appreciate what it really meant, because, I had been around it for so long, but focused on a lot of the other things that I was involved in, and Bob didn't discuss everything single thing with me, obviously not, but we knew the same people, and yet taking on the role was a lot different, it truly was. I was fortunate that I had been here and knew a lot of the people, in both my non profit work, my work in administration, and my work in the private sector, so to a certain degree, I knew coming into it, the various activities from different angles, you might say. So, assuming the role was kind of interesting because to a certain degree, when people come to lobby me, I kinda understand where they are coming from, but I want to hear something else too, because to me, it has given me great insight what people don't say and how they say what they do say, which I think is very valuable. Knowing how the administration works is helpful too, I believe that, despite who is in the White House, Republican or Democrat, the administrations usually act the same, certain things happen in the administration, and your aware of it, you know exactly the offices, and what position might be the person that might be the most important, people who don't exactly have titles that might be helpful, so its for me, been an interesting experience. It is a different role, and I think it's in a sense putting everything together that I have ever done in my whole life, and utilizing it, and I find that to be very fascinating.

Ron Sarasin: And you're probably better prepared than most members of Congress when they get here to Washington because of the experiences that you've had in prior years.

Congresswoman Matsui: I believe so, I know for a fact that I went through, at least when Bob got elected, well more than 26 years ago now, but when he got elected, how difficult it was the transitioning from Sacramento to Washington with a little one, and all the, trying to figure out the offices, just to process things. I already knew that already, which was a great help, and my son was already grown up, and that was good for me too, because I did not have to think about childcare or anything of those other household balancing things. I wouldn't say that it was easy; on the other hand, I felt that I had a lot under my belt and so I can focus on the job itself.

Ron Sarasin: Many people have written that spouses, who succeed their husbands in office, get a little bit of a honeymoon. Do you think you got a honeymoon? And does it still exist?

Congresswoman Matsui: I wouldn't say I had a honeymoon. I don't believe, I believe the elections are different today than they were before, and I think I mentioned to you before in Sacramento it's a community of families, and all of that it's still a very political town. I think my honeymoon, probably lasted, if there is a honeymoon, probably lasted two weeks. But that is the nature of politics, I felt, in a sense, and they felt that I needed to be tested. And I think that was important to a certain degree too, they knew that I was Bob's wife, they knew that I had worked at the White House, they knew I'd been involved in commissions and boards, but Bob's role was a member of Congress and I didn't. I wasn't involved in that role, so to speak. So, to assume, to decide to even want to be in that role, it was important for most people to see how strong I would be, if I knew the issues, and I just felt it was important to go through that. But I must say that the special election was so, it was a short election, to a certain degree, two months, and I just felt that it was just important to be out there and to express myself in a sense as a candidate. Once I got elected it was important for me to become a member of Congress. And so I felt that my re-election, in '06 was my election to a great degree; as a member of Congress and the job that I had done.

Ron Sarasin: Now it was probably inevitable that some people expected you to carry on the priorities that Bob had created, and yet you found your own voice, and you made that very, very clear. And it didn't take you very long to do it. How did you make that transition very quickly?

Congresswoman Matsui: Well obviously in Sacramento we have priorities, our local priorities, like, you know, flood control and mass transit, and all of that and those are going to be a member of Congress from Sacramento's priorities. And I'm over there fighting for that all the time. On the other hand, Bob and I weren't alike at all. And, when I took on the role, I remember in the beginning, I used to ask my staff, there were a few people who were carryovers on from my husband's staff, now what would Bob have done? Some where along the way, it must have been six months later, I didn't ask that question anymore. I didn't realize I didn't until all of a sudden I started making my own decisions and not even thinking about what he would have done. I believe also that it was important that I served on different committees Bob was never on the rules committee, he was never on transportation infrastructure, and its, he was always on ways and means and that's a different type of committee. So for me, I can express myself in a different kind of way because my committee assignments are different, and also I am different from my husband. I

have a passion for children's research, and healthcare, he did, but in the policy way with ways and means, I'm, I go to the hospitals an awful lot, UC Davis Med Center is in my district, to see what's going on, because that really does interest me, because I feel that it's, interest, it's very, it's very important for a member of Congress to be connected to what's going on in their district especially today because things are moving so quickly, and especially when you think about, in challenging times, we are in challenging times today and things move much more quickly, and you really want to make sure that you are at least on par with your district, and sometimes try to move a little bit ahead too.

Ron Sarasin: You and your family were interned during WWII. In fact you were born in an internment camp in Poston, Arizona. Although, obviously you were too young to remember the experience, looking back, what can be learned from that experience in the war? And how has that impacted your public career?

Congresswoman Matsui: I was born in an internment camp in Poston, Arizona. And, my parents actually met in camp, and married in camp, and I was born at the end of WWII so I was probably four months old when they were allowed to leave the camp. But, my parents, never really spoke about it. And we were encouraged to be all American in essence. I grew up in a small town, very active in all the activities, ran for office, and participated in everything. And so for me it was, they wanted the American dream for me, to a certain degree, in a sense because they didn't get theirs. And they also didn't want me to have any chip on my shoulder, or the feeling that I had any burdens on me. They were wonderful in that regard, and my father, he didn't really speak about it until after they started talking about the Redress Act and what could happen; he really didn't believe anything could happen. But we started talking about it then, because it was really remarkable because he obviously was born and raised in this country, and his father came to this country as a young man, well actually he wasn't a young man, he was probably middle aged and he married a young woman, and they had two children, but the whole family, it was during the flu, the Spanish flu in the twenties, whenever it was, and the whole family got sick, and my father's mother passed away, he was five and his brother was two, so my grandfather essentially raised them, he never married, they were in Southern California, and they had a nursery, and my uncle went off and served, and my father, my father had a business, it was a seed business, with a partner named Murphy, which I didn't even know about until I started reading his paper's afterwards, and its interesting

because they first did an initial evacuation to the central valley and then they went to Poston, and it was interesting because I didn't know a lot about these things, he filled me in on it, and after he passed away I read his diary. But he felt he had to be with his father, so he couldn't serve, his brother went off to serve, and then he went off to camp, and my mother's family, she was also born and raised here, and her parents were more fortunate in the sense that he was a fairly successful farmer, he owned land, in my mother's name obviously, because he couldn't own land, and so when they had to leave, they had some wonderful friends and I believe their names were the Sorensen family, and my grandfather had an agreement with them. Please live in our home, and take care of it, and you can take all the profits from farming, but just make sure that its there when we come back, and they did. And I saw some interesting letters between my mother and the Sorensen family about crops, and would you please, my mother would say, write to them to purchase certain things that they couldn't get in camp. It was quite remarkable; I didn't know any of this had happened.

Congresswoman Matsui: You have to understand these weren't things that I grew up with. They told me about it later, or I read about it. And my father said to me, and my mother had passed away before then, this was much after camp twenty years afterwards, thirty years afterwards, and my father afterwards said to me, when he was a widower, said there were so many things about camp that were so bad when they first got there. With holes in the walls, there was no walls to speak of, but paper that they could find, and old crates, and there was no privacy, but he said you know what we made it what we could make it. We tried to find every piece of scrap and wood we we could to build walls. He said we didn't have fresh vegetables, horrible food, so they got seeds to grow vegetables, and so they had a whole vegetable garden. And then they felt that they wanted to make the place look better, so they planted flowers, and he said you can't understand how it meant to see this flower bloom in this dry dessert. And he said it was, it was, something horrible but on the other hand they tried to make the best of it, because they felt they were gonna leave one day, and they didn't want to have wasted lives lets say during that time. So that's what they did, and my father also, being the way he was, he was an editor of the whole Poston camp, he before everybody was going to be leaving, he had a memorial book made so there are the pictures of everybody, everybody that was there at the time. And I remember seeing something lying around when I was in high school, and I never even thought about it, after my father died, about thirteen years ago, we started cleaning up and

found that again, and I had a better appreciate as to looking at the pictures of all those people, my father's friends, and my family who were in the camp at that time. So it was truly remarkable. My father always said to me, you know, he said as terrible as it was, and the fact they had to go through it, he always said, the best thing that came out of that experience is, that Doris you were born. It was like something to look forward to, so it did change my life to a certain degree, in the sense of the way I think about it now; I have a greater appreciation for this country and the fact that it can look at that, admit it made a mistake and move forward. And to me it's important, I think as Japanese Americans who have shared on that experience to ensure that never happens again, that in today's world too that, to have a balance of civil liberties and security I think its, the lesson is very strong, even today.

Ron Sarasin: And that obviously is one of the most important issues that faces the nation today the need for balance and national security while protecting civil rights; with your background and the experience that you've had and that you've learned about from your own family. Do you find it difficult to maintain this balance?

Congresswoman Matsui: I feel that it's important, this is a wonderful country, and the founding fathers were unbelievable and what they had as the basic definition of our country. And with the Constitution, which I believe is a living document, it does in itself embrace so much of what makes this country great. But because, it's not in a sense, we're not a monarchy, we're not a, there is no socialism here, it's in a sense a fine balance here, and every once in a while, we have to balance it out, because it goes one way and we have to balance it out another way. This is an interesting time because every single one of us, as members of Congress, understand how it's important to protect this country. That is our priority. We also understand that this country is based upon freedoms too, one of which is our civil liberties, and to a certain degree that exquisite balance is what makes our country great, and to a certain degree because we come from different parts of the world, we have different experiences, that is always being tested, and I have every bit of optimism that we can always do that as long as we understand that, that is what our founding father's had seen for this country, and what makes this country great.

Ron Sarasin: You currently serve on two of the most important committees on Congress; Transportation and Infrastructure, and Rules. Most people aren't really aware of what the rules committee

does and how it works. Talk to us about that. What the purpose of the Rules Committee?

Congresswoman Matsui: The Rules Committee is a leadership committee. It is a so called exclusive committee although I also have transportation and infrastructure, but it is an arm of the leadership, and what it basically does is any legislation that has to hit the floor goes before the Rules Committee. So the people who come before the Rules Committee the chairman or ranking member always do, and also other various people who want to have amendments made in order. And I respect it's a very powerful committee, everything that's important to the house comes before our committee. We hope as it comes to our committee we can make the right amendments in order to ensure the bill is better, that it can maybe attract more people for passage, but is also an avenue for us to change things too. It makes it stop before, on the Rules Committee, just in case too. And because of that, it is a powerful committee, and we do meet an awful lot too. And the things that might be somewhat contentious especially are something that the rules committee has to deal with, which is why it is our leadership committee. And as much as possible we do reflect the leadership, on the other hand, the discussions sometimes in the rules committee I really wish more people can hear them, because by the time it gets to us and we can engage the committee chairman in ranking people, and some of the other members who want to make their amendments order. It is quite remarkable what comes out in those committees and sometimes that does shape the way we decide to make those amendments in order. It is a committee that I enjoy, because from the perch, on the Rules Committee, we know everything that goes on in the house, which is, you know, for someone like me who likes to know what's going on, it's really quite fascinating. But is also, is, gives you a sense of how important institution is. I feel like, many times, when you're the other committees you really get a great idea of the committee itself and what it does and the rules committee has to deal with the whole house and to that degree I have had much more appreciation for the history of the house and the fact that it is truly an institution that reflects the people, and because of that our role and that I feel is very important. So, it is a committee that most people don't know about, on the other hand, all of my members, and all of my colleagues know what the Rules Committee is.

Ron Sarasin: 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. How would you compare your experience with Congress with Congress today? And even Bob's experience. And have you noticed an increasing partisanship and a lack of comity, and has that hindered the ability of Congress to legislate, and what solutions would you suggest?

Congresswoman Matsui: I do have a different viewpoint on this but, I suppose because, when my husband got elected in 1978 the Democrats were the majority party by a great margin. And when we came here, we came together at a very bipartisan way, we wouldn't, at that time, at least monthly with our class in a bipartisan way, spouses had their own group, and Californians got together in a bipartisan manner, everything was done pretty much in a bipartisan way. And because we had a young child, obviously, you know, the kids played together. The spouses were friends because we had our own activities also, and because of that, there was personal relationships across the aisle, and it was very nice, because the members themselves could argue vociferously during the day as far as policy, but they were friends, because how can you be angry, when your spouses, your wives know each other, your spouses know each other, the kids play together, and we did far more together and that was another time too, when most members brought their families back here, and it's different today most members of Congress do not come back here, because, things have changed, most women have their own professional careers, it's too expensive to maintain two households, and for various reasons, things have changed, and I believe the change has been because the social aspects of it are not as easily accessible any longer, and I think that's really sad. I have been here long enough to know that people hunger for that, and I think the reason that people hunger for that is that they just don't want this to be about work in the sense that it goes through 24 hours a day that your angry all the time. What I believe is important is that to move forward is to find ways to reach across the aisle I try to do that on an individual bills, I try to find a Republican co-sponsor or try to get people involved in ways, because I think it's important. You can start with non controversial things to bring people on; unless people work together they'll never start trusting each other. You can disagree on policy, but there are some things you can agree on, well let's start with some of those things first, and agree to disagree on some of the other things, and laugh about it, and I feel that we can make progress in that way, it will be slow but we can make progress in that way.

Ron Sarasin: Do you think you can find the time again for the social aspect of it, to be able to bring people together as it used to be?

Congresswoman Matsui: It's going to be very difficult. I see many members whose families aren't here get together after work, maybe have dinner or something like that. Of course our schedules are not conducive to much of that but there are groups of people who like to get together maybe play bridge, or whatever it is. Those are the kinds of things at least, that you see Republicans and Democrats do that, bridge is not something that is one party, neither is poker, although I've never played poker. There are ways to do that, I think there might be some bipartisan activity which I believe people are more receptive to now, than they might have been before. We went through a time of difficult partisanship I believe starting in the 90's, and I think its starting now, to sort of, people are looking at it, saying we can't keep on this way. Now there is going to be some of it, and we realize that, and it will take awhile, but this job is more than, it really is representing your constituents and ultimately the country. And ultimately, we need to work together to ensure that we do represent our constituents in a way they feel we should represent them and also think about the country also, because ultimately that's what we are, we are here representing the people, and we make decisions on behalf of the country.

Ron Sarasin: Our final question is, as we say, the legacy question. Over and above the things you have accomplished or have yet to accomplish how would you like to be remembered?

Congresswoman Matsui: That's, that's quite a question. I feel like I, I have two grandchildren, Anna who is four and Robbie who is a year, they're my touchstone to the future, and I want to ensure that what I do today will make their lives better, and that's not only their lives, but every Anna and Robbie in every neighborhood in this country. So, I want my legacy to be that I left this place better off than when I came to this place.

Ron Sarasin: That is a wonderful thought. As one of the people who has watched your family grow, I have been the beneficiary of Bob's and yours holiday cards every year and I've watched your boy grow up in those cards. It's been an amazing, amazing progress. Thank you very much. We really appreciate the fact that you have given up your time to be part of this series. Thank you.

Congresswoman Matsui: It was my pleasure, thank you.