

Fofó I. F. Sunia

1937–

DELEGATE 1981–1988
DEMOCRAT FROM AMERICAN SAMOA

As the first Delegate from American Samoa, Fofó I. F. Sunia spent most of his four terms in Congress trying to give voice to and to carve out a new role for his small, faraway constituency in the South Pacific. He quickly found it to be a constant process of having to educate his colleagues. “To be sitting amongst people who really didn’t understand who you are or even why you’re here—that struck me as a point of some frustration,” Sunia observed. “I guess I was expecting a little bit too much. I thought that everybody was going to know that there was a representative from American Samoa come January and (would say), ‘We’ve got to make way for him’ and ‘We know all about his territory.’ That wasn’t so.”¹ While he advocated bringing American Samoans further into the political, economic, and military embrace of the mainland, he also was wary of protecting Samoan traditions and culture. Sunia’s career collapsed, however, when he was implicated in a fraud scheme to enrich himself by paying ghost employees on his official payroll.

Fofó Iosefa Fiti Sunia was born on March 13, 1937, in Fagasa, Pago Pago, American Samoa. He was the eldest of eleven children of Fiti and Savali Sunia. His father, Fiti, was a minister and Sunia himself later served as a deacon and lay minister in the Christian Congregational Church of Samoa.² His brothers, Tauese and Ipulasi, later served as governor and lieutenant governor of American Samoa, respectively. Sunia graduated from Samoana High School in Pago Pago in 1955 before leaving Samoa for Honolulu, Hawaii, to earn his bachelor’s degree in economics from the University of Hawaii. After graduating in 1960, he returned to Samoa, working as a translator and interpreter for the territorial governor. In the early 1960s, Sunia founded and edited the *Samoa News*.

Sunia’s work for the territorial governor and as a journalist provided a segue into local politics. For

much of the 1960s, he served as the territorial election commissioner (1962–1970). He also held a post as the first director of tourism for American Samoa from 1966 to 1972 and was president and chairman of the American Samoan Development Corporation from 1965 to 1971. In 1969 Sunia ran for and won a senate seat in the American Samoa legislature and served from 1970 to 1978. Sunia married Aioletuna V. (Ta’amū) Sunia in 1960, and together they raised eight children: Fiti, Melina, Iosefa, Vaaomala, Alexander, Cynthia, Lupe, and Fiafia.³ In addition to serving in his church, Sunia also was a *matai*, or chief, of a Samoan clan. Fofó means “talking chief” in Samoan, and Sunia preferred that title to simply being called “chief.”

In 1978 Congress extended territorial representation to American Samoa, providing for a Delegate to serve as the islands’ representative on Capitol Hill. The territory, located in the Pacific, roughly between Hawaii and Australia, is made up of five islands and two atolls. Its total land area is comparable to the size of Washington, DC, but is more than 7,000 nautical miles away from the nation’s capital. In 1980, in the first election for Delegate, Sunia ran as an independent and entered a three-way race for the seat. Although he led the field on election day, he did not secure a majority, carrying nearly 44 percent of the vote against 38 percent for another independent candidate, Eni Fa’aua’a Hunkin Jr., and 18 percent for Democratic candidate I. S. Mulitauaoepe. Sunia faced Hunkin in the runoff on November 18, winning with 59 to 41 percent.⁴ In the House, Sunia caucused with the Democrats, which controlled the majority. He coasted to re-election in his subsequent three general elections in which he ran as a Democratic candidate. He was unopposed in 1982 and won 65 and 56 percent of the vote against Aumeoualogo Salanoa Soli in 1984 and 1986, respectfully.⁵





When Sunia entered the House at the opening of the 97th Congress (1981–1983), he was assigned to the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee (where he served through the 98th Congress [1983–1985]) and the Public Works and Transportation Committee. He held the latter assignment for his entire House career, eventually rising to chair the Subcommittee on Public Buildings and grounds for the 100th Congress (1987–1989) in 1987. Sunia also picked up two additional committee assignments during his career: Interior and Insular Affairs (99th–100th Congresses [1985–1989]) and the Foreign Affairs Committee, during his final term. Like other Territorial Delegates, Sunia could vote in committee, introduce legislation, and hold committee leadership positions, but could not vote on the House Floor.

The *Washington Post* profiled Sunia in a 1982 article with the subtitle, “The Village Chief Brings a Touch of the South Seas.” Described by a reporter as a relaxed, jovial, large man—some 300 pounds when he was sworn into office—Sunia emphasized that the easy-going Samoan life could have advantages in frenetic Washington. On Capitol Hill, “everybody’s banging their heads against a wall and rushing around,” Sunia said. “I figure the guy who walks slowly will stand out. If everybody’s yelling, they’re going to take notice of the guy that speaks softly.”⁶ But that low-key approach didn’t necessarily translate into visibility right away. *The Almanac of American Politics* called Sunia “something of an unknown quantity” during his first term in Washington.⁷

Without the ability to vote on legislation on the House Floor, Sunia focused on the time-honored tradition of constituent service. He employed an intimate approach with his modest constituency of roughly 34,000 people—right down to writing personal replies to letters that arrived at his DC office. “Many of these people are friends,” Sunia explained. “I’d feel guilty if I don’t answer personally.”⁸

Although his office was a daylong flight away from his home, Sunia decorated it in a fashion resembling “a microcosm of a Samoan village,” an aide noted. “A woven mat of pandana leaves hangs on the wall, strewn with pink feathers and pearly shells. There are bowls of teak, conch shells, and bright patterns stenciled on pressed bark.”⁹

That décor reflected Sunia’s pride in his culture, but it also highlighted a tension between modern notions of progress and the Samoan emphasis on tradition and family. He was quick to point out, for instance, that American Samoa did not fund island-wide welfare programs, it had declined to participate in federal aid initiatives, and it had refused to accept food stamps. “We felt they were really not in line with the ways of our customs and culture,” Sunia explained. “While it’s always nice to have money, it really would not be helpful in a much larger sense. The very fiber of the place is family units, and families tend to help their own and to help each other. When you start having this almost total dependence on someone else you’re going to lose that.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, he didn’t hesitate to embrace some measure of federal assistance for his largely poor constituency when he supported the Hunger Relief Act of 1984, which covered the states and U.S. territories. “America and its territories promote freedom, equality, and opportunity, and I believe that no American should experience hunger in this land of plenty,” Sunia said.¹¹

In the long tradition of Delegates for the territories, Sunia spent much of his legislative activity testifying before House and Senate committees, including the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs and the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. One of his principal concerns was that Congress retain sole discretion over amending the American Samoa constitution, rather than delegating the power to the Secretary of the Interior. Sunia believed that as the only unorganized and unincorporated territory in the United States, American Samoa needed its status to be directly addressed by Congress: “A people’s constitution, its basic governing document, cannot be placed at the mercy of one man. By giving itself the authority to act on any and all changes, Congress made certain that the Secretary of the Interior did not have unilateral authority to change the American Samoa Constitution and that the territorial government was allowed to develop in an orderly, democratic fashion.”¹² At stake in that debate were issues pertaining to traditional Samoan land rights and titles that the Interior Department sought to open to federal court review.¹³



In four Congresses, Sunia introduced just 13 bills, all of which dealt with American Samoa. All died in committee, with just one bill (H.R. 3555, which amended a “joint resolution to provide for accepting, ratifying, and confirming the cession of certain islands of the Samoan group to the United States”) receiving even a subcommittee hearing. His floor speeches addressed issues touching on education, unemployment and job creation, protecting American Samoa’s tuna fishing and canning industry, infrastructure improvements, and regional security issues in the Pacific islands during the late stages of the Cold War. Among the bills that Sunia authored were measures to amend the National Housing Act to extend loan mortgage insurance programs to American Samoa, to give the Samoan Delegate the right to make appointments to the U.S. service academies, to establish a National Guard in American Samoa, to amend the Social Security Act to create a Medicaid program in Samoa, to exempt Samoan U.S. nationals from having to meet the language requirements for citizenship, and to authorize the American Samoa legislature to draft a constitution for the local self-government of the people of American Samoa.¹⁴ Sunia managed only a handful of cosponsors for these bills; some received none at all.

Without the power to vote, Sunia’s legislative accomplishments were often minor. He claimed credit for convincing Congress to permit the duty-free transportation of fish products in the Pacific territories and worked to maintain import fees on tuna shipped to the United States from the Caribbean. Sunia felt that American Samoa’s tuna fishing and packing industry, its only major job sector, would risk an “economic disaster” if it faced additional competition. Sunia also pushed for a provision allowing American Samoans to enter into the U.S. Merchant Marine.¹⁵

Sunia’s career imploded during his fourth term in Congress because of a scandal arising from the improper use of his official allowance. He was charged with using tens of thousands of dollars of federal funds to hire employees who did not exist and then distributing the money to the personal account of his principal aide,

Matthew Iuli, and to his own election campaign account.¹⁶ Sunia insisted that he had been unaware of the scheme when Iuli hatched it in 1983.¹⁷ In October 1987, the House Ethics Committee began an inquiry into the allegations.¹⁸ After pleading guilty to a charge of conspiracy to defraud the government, Sunia resigned his seat on September 6, 1988.¹⁹ A month later, Sunia was sentenced to five to 15 months in prison, “for conspiring ... to defraud the government of \$130,920 through false payroll claims.”²⁰ At his sentencing, Sunia admitted, “I have come to understand the meaning of shame, fear. I have made apologies to my people and I hope they will forgive me.”²¹ Sunia eventually returned to Pago Pago, where he still resides.

NOTES:

- 1 Ted Gup, “Samoan Adjusts to Washington,” 20 August 1982, *Los Angeles Times*: D5.
- 2 Ted Gup, “American Samoa’s Man in Congress: The Village Chief Brings a Touch of the South Seas,” 26 April 1982, *Washington Post*: C1. The 1940 Census records do not provide information on the Sunias. However, several sources list parent and sibling names. See, for example, <http://politicalgraveyard.com/families/18853.html> (accessed 6 April 2016).
- 3 *Congressional Directory*, 100th Cong. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1987): 229.
- 4 Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/>.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Gup, “American Samoa’s Man in Congress.”
- 7 *Almanac of American Politics, 1982* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1981): 1213.
- 8 Philip Shenon, “In the House, But Without Votes,” 12 April 1985, *New York Times*: A14.
- 9 Gup, “Samoan Adjusts to Washington.”
- 10 Gup, “American Samoa’s Man in Congress.”
- 11 *Congressional Record*, House, 98th Cong., 2nd sess. (27 July 1984): 21450–21451.
- 12 Hearing before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Energy Conservation and Supply, *Revised Constitution of American Samoa*, 98th Cong., 2nd sess. (8 May 1984): 2–7. See also *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (20 May 1982): 10824.



- 13 Hearings before the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Office of Territorial and International Affairs, Department of Interior*, 97th Cong., 1st sess. (15 December 1981): especially 19–22, for an exchange between Sunia and Won Pat.
- 14 *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 1st sess. (18 November 1981): 27983; *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (10 February 1982): 1401; *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (23 February 1982): 2011; *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (25 February 1982): 2435.
- 15 *Almanac of American Politics, 1986* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1985): 1491; *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (13 December 1982): 30245. Sunia had just assumed the chairmanship of the Public Works and Transportation Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds when he ran into ethics problems. Much of the committee's work was conducted after he resigned his seat. A resume of the subcommittee activities is available in House Committee on Public Works and Transportation, *Summary of Legislative Activities, 100th Congress*, 100th Cong., 2nd sess., H. Rept. 1121 (30 December 1988): 59–61.
- 16 "Samoan Delegate Accused of Fraud," 1 August 1988, *New York Times*: B5. See also "Samoa's House Delegate Accused of Payroll Fraud; \$70,000 Allegedly Paid to Ghost Employees," 15 August 1987, *Washington Post*: A3.
- 17 "Samoan Delegate Enters Plea," 5 August 1988, *New York Times*: A10.
- 18 Jim Drinkard, "Panel Votes to Begin Preliminary Inquiry Involving Delegate from American Samoa," 28 October 1987, Associated Press.
- 19 "House Delegate from Samoa Resigns After Guilty Plea," 7 September 1988, *Chicago Tribune*: 4; "House Schedules Disciplinary Hearings Against Sunia in Fraud Case," 10 August 1988, Associated Press.
- 20 "Samoan Ex-Delegate Sunia Sentenced," 5 October 1988, *Washington Post*: 2.
- 21 "Ex-Delegate for Samoa Faces Prison Term," 5 October 1988, *New York Times*: A17.



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Washington Post, April 26, 1982