

Mark Takai

1967–2016

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 2015–2016
DEMOCRAT FROM HAWAII

Immediately after finishing graduate school, Mark Takai dedicated himself to public service. He served the state of Hawaii for the rest of his life, first in the state house of representatives and then in Congress. During his legislative career, Takai drew on his experiences as a college athlete, small-business owner, and Iraq War veteran. He consistently stressed “putting Hawaii and its people first.” His political career ended abruptly when he was diagnosed with cancer, and he announced that he would not seek re-election barely a year into his first term in the U.S. House of Representatives. After his death, Hawaii’s governor, David Ige, eulogized his longtime friend: “Mark humbly and effectively served the people of his state House and Congressional districts. In the often tumultuous world of politics, he has been a shining example of what it means to be a public servant.”¹

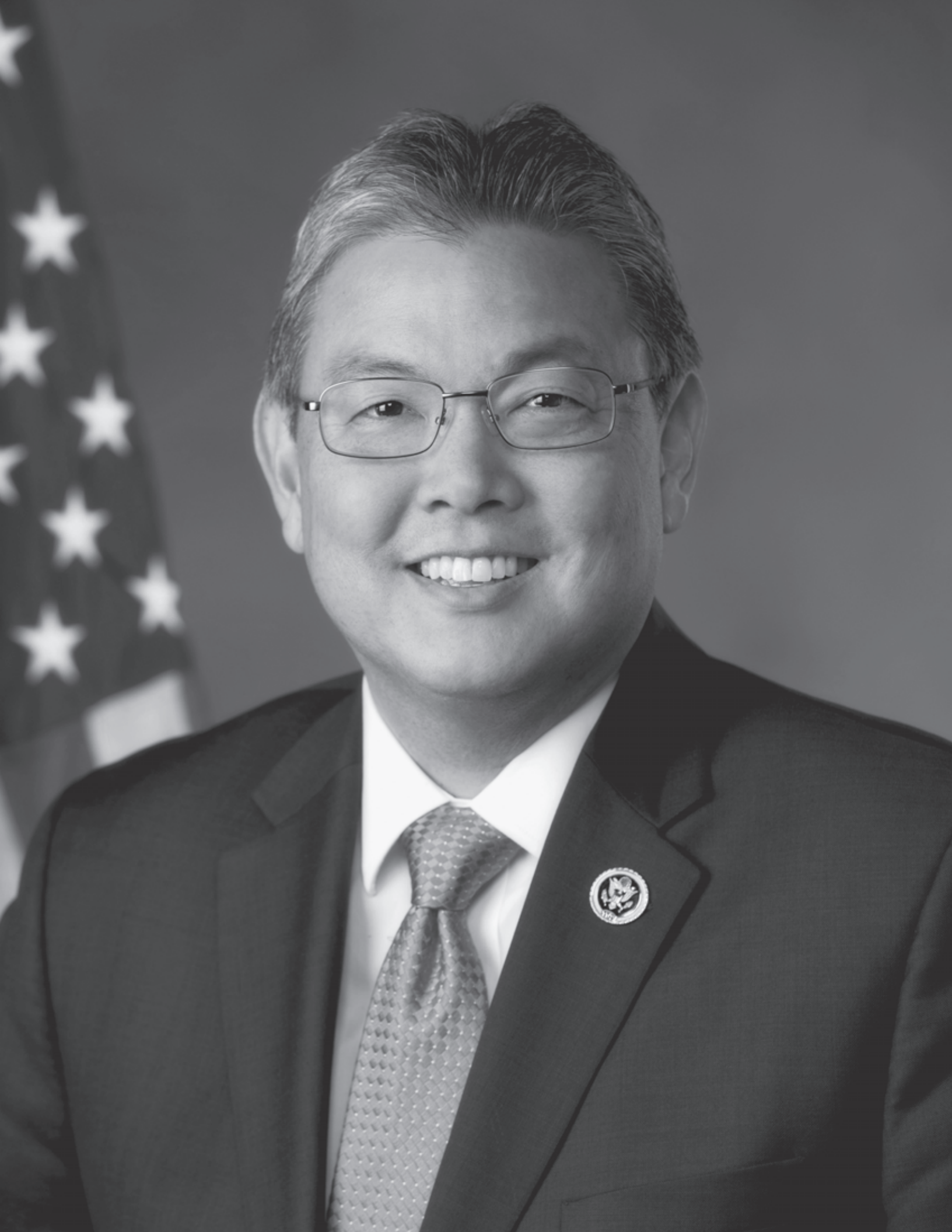
Kyle Mark Takai was born on July 1, 1967, in Honolulu, Hawaii, to Erik, an electrical engineer, and Naomi Takai, a public servant in the city and county of Honolulu. Mark, his brother, and two sisters grew up in suburban Honolulu. In 1985 Takai graduated from Pearl City High School in Pearl City, Hawaii, and then attended the University of Hawaii in Manoa, Hawaii, where he was editor-in-chief of the school newspaper, student body president, and a champion swimmer.² He graduated with a bachelor’s degree in political science in 1990 and earned a master’s in public health in 1993. Takai met his future wife, Sami Aya, while attending college, and they married soon after graduation and had two children, Matthew and Kaila. Mark and Sami ran a small insurance brokerage and consulting firm from their home in Hawaii.³

Takai began a lengthy career in politics in 1994, winning election to the Hawaii house of representatives from the Aiea region in western Honolulu County. He vigorously defended funding for state schools and his

alma mater, the University of Hawaii, proposing a fund to match public donations with state money to maintain the school’s sports programs. He also procured funding for the university’s library and labs.⁴ Takai’s decision in 1999 to join the Hawaii Army National Guard reinforced his support for veterans’ issues. He introduced legislation creating the Hawaii Medal of Honor—the first of its kind in the nation—to salute the state’s fallen soldiers and their families. He also supported the creation of the Veterans Treatment Court, which pooled the resources of the state courts and federal veterans’ affairs services to offer better access to treatment and counseling for veterans seeking employment and health care.⁵

As a member of the National Guard, Takai was twice called to active duty for six-month periods. He remained in Hawaii in an administrative capacity as the deputy state surgeon in 2005 and then deployed to Iraq as a preventive medical officer in 2009. He retained his seat in the state legislature during both activations and relied primarily on David Ige, then a state senator, to help cover his legislative duties.⁶ He returned from deployment to serve as vice speaker from 2005 to 2006. From 2012 to 2013, Takai served as president of the Hawaii National Guard Association and was instrumental in bringing the national conference to Hawaii in 2013.⁷ By 2015 he had attained the rank of a lieutenant colonel.

The opportunity for Takai’s congressional candidacy arose when Colleen Hanabusa vacated her House seat representing urban Oahu to run for the U.S. Senate. Takai entered a Democratic primary field that included six other candidates, among them state senate president Donna Mercado Kim. Takai won a 43 percent plurality in the October primary.⁸ He faced former Representative Charles Djou in the general election. Both candidates touted their military service, but the campaign largely boiled down to





fundamental differences in political philosophy about the size of the government. Takai also stressed the importance of a united Hawaiian delegation.⁹ Takai received the endorsement of the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, which provided him with a boost in an unusually close campaign for the Democratic stronghold. Takai prevailed, winning 52 percent of the vote.¹⁰

Coming out of that tight race, Takai displayed optimism for bipartisanship in the weeks before the Opening Day of the 114th Congress (2015–2017). “I do believe we have a window of opportunity to bring everybody together to deliver for this nation,” he said, “and I want to be part of that.”¹¹ He focused much of his attention on his committee assignments, Armed Services and Small Business. He prioritized small businesses, protecting the environment, reforming student loan debt, and improving veterans’ care. His first proposed legislation would have made it easier for Filipino veterans of World War II to reunite with their families living in the United States.¹²

In November 2015, Takai announced he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The following May, Takai shared that the cancer had spread despite treatment and that he had decided not to seek re-election. “In life, we often make plans for ourselves,” he observed. “I had envisioned a long career in the U.S. House of Representatives, building up the seniority and influence that were key to Sen. (Daniel) Inouye’s ability to deliver for Hawaii. But as often happens, we find ourselves on a different journey than what we had planned.”¹³ Mark Takai died on July 20, 2016, at his home in Honolulu.

NOTES

- 1 Kevin Dayton, “U.S. Rep. Mark Takai Dies after Battle with Pancreatic Cancer,” 20 July 2016, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, <http://www.staradvertiser.com/breaking-news/u-s-rep-mark-takai-dies-after-battle-with-pancreatic-cancer/> (accessed 22 July 2016).
- 2 Emily Langer, “Hawaii Democrat Was in His First Term in House,” 21 July 2016, *Washington Post*: B6; “Mark Takai, Congressman from Hawaii, Dies at 49,” 23 July 2016, *New York Times*: D6; Kevin Dayton and Sophie Cocke, “Takai Leaves ‘Legacy of Courage, of Service, and of Hope,’” 21 July 2016, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*,

<http://www.staradvertiser.com/hawaii-news/takai-leaves-legacy-of-courage-of-service-and-of-hope/> (accessed 22 July 2016).

- 3 Langer, “Hawaii Democrat Was in His First Term in House.”
- 4 Fred Lewis, “K. Mark Takai: Forever a Rainbow,” 21 July 2016, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, <http://www.staradvertiser.com/sports/k-mark-takai-forever-a-rainbow/> (accessed 22 July 2016).
- 5 Langer, “Hawaii Democrat Was in His First Term in House”; Mark Niese, “Isle Veterans Court Sought,” 25 April 2010, *Honolulu Advertiser*, <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2010/Apr/25/ln/hawaii4250370.html> (accessed 2 August 2016); *Almanac of American Politics, 2016* (Columbia Books & Information Services, 2015): 564.
- 6 “Hawaii Rep. Takai to be Deployed to Kuwait,” 19 January 2009, *Honolulu Advertiser*, <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2009/Jan/19/br/hawaii90119062.html> (accessed 2 August 2016).
- 7 “Takai Ends Re-election Bid To Focus on Cancer Fight,” June 2016, *National Guard*: 8.
- 8 *Almanac of American Politics, 2016*: 565.
- 9 B. J. Reyes, “In Televised Debate, Takai Aims to Link Djou to Tea Party,” 12 October 2014, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, <http://www.staradvertiser.com/hawaii-news/in-televised-debate-takai-aims-to-link-djou-to-tea-party/> (accessed 28 July 2014).
- 10 Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/>.
- 11 B. J. Reyes, “Takai Heads to Washington with Hope for Bipartisan Unity,” 17 November 2014, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, <http://www.staradvertiser.com/hawaii-news/takai-heads-to-washington-with-hope-for-bipartisan-unity/> (accessed 28 July 2014).
- 12 Dayton and Cocke, “Takai Leaves ‘Legacy of Courage, of Service, and of Hope,’” *Almanac of American Politics, 2016*: 565.
- 13 Dayton, “U.S. Rep. Mark Takai Dies after Battle with Pancreatic Cancer.”



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Honolulu Star-Advertiser, January 19, 2009