Richard Newell Cooper, International Economist 1934-2020

Internationally known Economist, political advisor and Professor Dr. Richard N. Cooper died at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts on December 23, 2020. A Harvard Professor for forty years, Cooper served in the administrations of every Democratic President, from John F. Kennedy through William J. Clinton.

President Jimmy Carter offered this statement:

“Rosalynn and I are saddened by the passing of Richard Cooper, Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs during my administration. I could always rely on his friendship and diplomatic understanding. I remain grateful for his key advice on the economic dimensions of the Camp David Accords and the major role he played in the G7 summits. We are grateful to have been personally touched by Richard’s talents, and we will keep his family in our prayers.”

Cooper was born in Seattle in 1934 during the Great Depression but his family moved to Maryland so that his father could work for FDR’s New Deal. Richard earned a full scholarship to Oberlin College, where he served as Editor-in-Chief of the Oberlin Review and made friendships maintained throughout his life. He studied at the London School of Economics on a two year Marshall Scholarship and completed his Ph.D. at Harvard in International Economics in 1962.

Richard Cooper, best known as simply Dick Cooper, was only 26 years old when he was first offered a position in Washington, D.C. as a senior staff economist at the Council of Economic Advisors based on his thesis work at the Brookings Institution. Shortly thereafter he was called by then Attorney General Robert Kennedy to explain the Gold Standard.

An unpretentious man, Cooper once noticed his unpolished shoes (fresh from exploring the economics of the local camel trade in Khartoum) just before a meeting with Anwar Sadat. His colleague noted that polished shoes would have looked out of place with his rumpled suit. Those who worked for him were never fooled by his casual attire that belied his shrewd understanding of the international political arena.

Cooper was the Maurits C. Boas Professor of International Economics at Harvard University from 1981-2020. Previously he taught at Yale University where he was the Frank Altschul Professor of International Economics from 1966-1977 with a two-year stint as Provost. Cooper served as Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs during the Carter Administration (1977-81). From 1990-1992 Cooper was Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. During the Clinton Administration he served as Chairman of the National Intelligence Council (1995-1997). Among many other honors he received National Intelligence Service Medal in 1996. He also served as a member of the Trilateral Commission, Council on Foreign Relations, the Brookings Panel on Economic Activity and the Aspen Strategy Group.

Cooper will be interred at Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, MA. He is survived by his wife Jin and their children William and Jennifer. He is also survived by his first wife Carolyn Cooper and adult children Laura and Mark of Seattle, Washington, granddaughter Isabelle, brother Robert C. Cooper of Colorado, nieces and nephews.

Despite his many books and publications, appointments on major boards and political appointments, Cooper described himself simply as a teacher and civil servant. He continued to teach until the last week of his life.