

# Richard N. Cooper, Harvard economist and adviser to presidents, dies at 86

By **Globe Staff and Wire Reports** Updated February 3, 2021, 7:29 p.m.

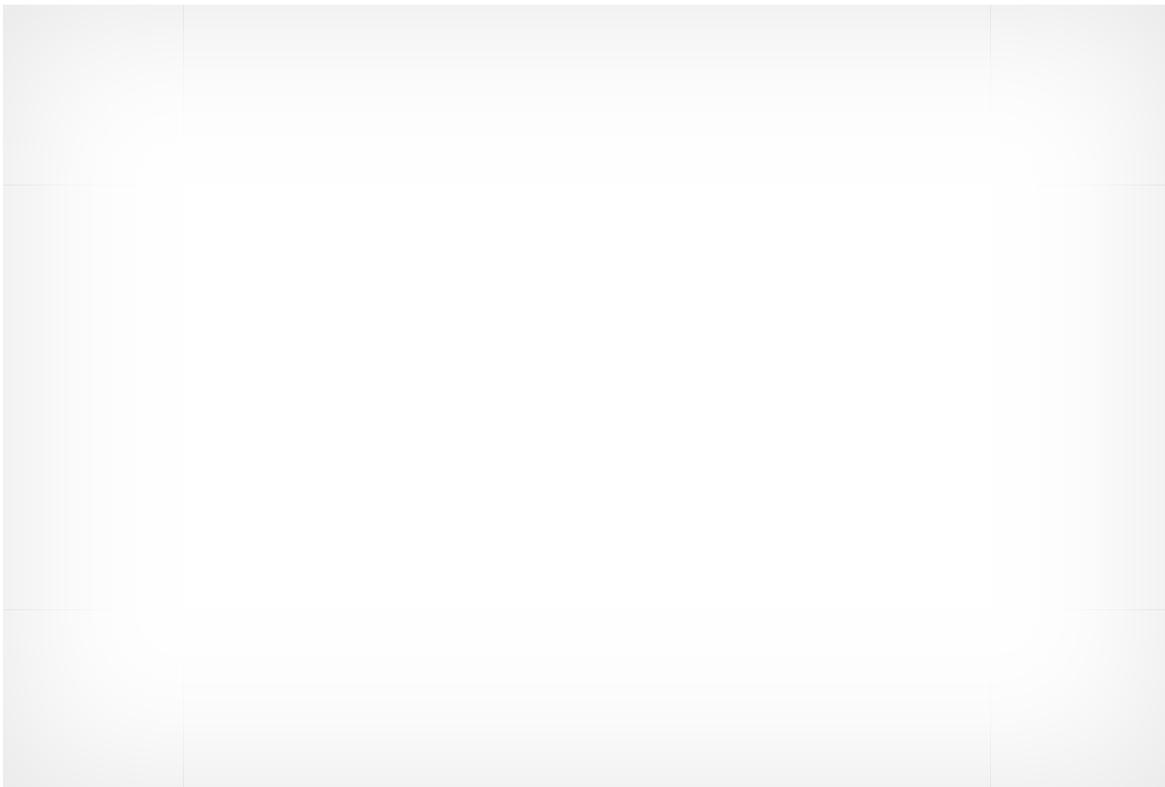


Dr. Cooper served n four presidential administrations. COOPER FAMILY

With his [1968 book](#) “The Economics of Interdependence” and his other writings of that period, economist Richard N. Cooper promoted cooperation among nations, even when doing so required considerable effort.

“The trend toward greater economic interdependence among countries will require substantial changes in their approach to foreign policy in the next decade or so,” he wrote in a 1972 article for the journal [World Politics](#).

His publications on the topic can be seen as “the original foundation of the study of international cooperation or coordination of macroeconomic policy,” Jeffrey A. Frankel a friend and a Harvard Kennedy School professor, wrote recently in an [online tribute](#) to Dr. Cooper.



“He played a role in the canonical example of international coordination of fiscal policies: the ‘locomotive theory’ under which the US, Germany, and Japan would be the three locomotives who would together use fiscal expansion to pull the world economic train out of the aftermath of the 1974-75 recession,” Frankel said in his blog post. “The theory was arguably put into practice in 1978, in the Bonn Summit of G-7

leaders.”

Dr. Cooper, who had been the Maurits C. Boas professor of international economics at Harvard University and an economic adviser to presidents, died Dec. 23 in his Cambridge home at 86 of lymphoma, his family told The Washington Post.

“He was always asking the right question, and always interested in taking the discussion of any piece of work right to the question of why it mattered for economic policy, and what should be done as a result,” [Benjamin Friedman](#), a professor of political economy at Harvard, said for the Harvard Gazette’s tribute to Dr. Cooper.

In the 1970s, Dr. Cooper served as undersecretary of state for economic affairs in the administration of President Carter.

Previously, he had been a [senior staff economist](#) on President Kennedy’s Council of Economic Advisers and deputy assistant secretary of state for international monetary affairs in President Johnson’s administration. During the 1990s, Dr. Cooper chaired the National Intelligence Council during the administration of President Clinton.

In the early 1990s, Dr. Cooper served as chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. He also had served as a member of the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Brookings Panel on Economic Activity.

Dr. Cooper spent most of his career in academia, including teaching international economics from 1966 to 1977 at Yale University, where he was provost from 1972 to 1974.

He joined Harvard’s faculty in 1981, after his time in the Carter administration.

Dr. Cooper “understood that human systems are complex,” [Kenneth Rogoff](#), an economics professor who was among his colleagues in the university’s economics department, told the [Harvard Gazette](#). “He wanted to bring realism, institutional understanding, and historical experience to economics, not just mathematical technique.”

Richard Newell Cooper was born on June 14, 1934, in Seattle and grew up in Greenbelt, Md.

[He graduated](#) from Oberlin College in Ohio, which he attended on a scholarship, his family said, and then received a master’s from the London School of Economics while studying on a Marshall Scholarship.

After finishing his doctorate at Harvard University, Dr. Cooper was only 26 when he became a senior staff economist with the Council of Economic Advisers.

Among the books Dr. Cooper wrote, coauthored, or edited are “Boom, Crisis, and Adjustment,” “Macroeconomic Management in Korea, 1970-1990,” “Environment and Resource Policies for the World Economy,” and “What the Future Holds.”

His first marriage, to Carolyn Cooper, ended in divorce. They had two children, Laura and Mark, who now live in Seattle.

Along with the three of them, Dr. Cooper leaves his wife of 20 years, Jin Chen Cooper, and their children, William and Jennifer, all of Cambridge; a brother, Robert of Colorado; and a granddaughter.

A service will be announced, according to Harvard.

Dr. Cooper was “unpretentious,” his family wrote in a tribute, and “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.”

Such a casual approach to his attire was matched by Dr. Cooper’s devotion to his work, said his family, who noted that he taught “until the last week of his life.”

“He wanted to continue life at full speed until the very last minute,” his wife wrote in a tribute that is linked on a [Harvard website](#).

An avid bicyclist into his last years, he “used to bring his bicycle into his office at the Old Executive Office Building” in the Kennedy administration, Frankel wrote in his blog tribute, and Dr. Cooper was still bicycling around Cambridge last year.

Dr. Cooper “insisted that people clarify precisely what they meant, whether it was in conferences or at the dinner table,” Frankel wrote. “He had boundless intellectual curiosity and physical energy. He looked on the bright side of things.”

*Material from The Washington Post was used in this report.*

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