

Remembering Robert W. Fri (1935–2014)

by Pete Nelson



The first time I met Bob Fri, he was in uniform, as was I. He had volunteered for the unenviable task of guiding a pack of 10-year-old Cub Scouts, a job he was spectacularly well suited for. He was clear, supportive, and always had a twinkle in his eye. When I joined RFF some decades later and found myself lucky enough to call him a colleague, it was obvious that those qualities were fundamental to him and I think explain his marvelous career.

I arrived at RFF after Bob had stepped down as president, so I have less of a window on that career than other colleagues do. My memories are more personal—of a man who from the first time I met him to the last time I saw him was always generous to me in his support and advice. His observations were often very funny and invariably wise.

We have assembled here tributes to Bob based on some of the major institutions where he invested his considerable talents. The arc of his career spans service at RFF,

the Environmental Protection Agency, the Energy Research and Development Administration, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, as well as major engagement with the National Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Arts and Sciences. His memory will live on in the research field and through support to RFF as a member of the Legacy Society.

“Whatever the venue, Bob brought to bear his considerable talent for leadership, his remarkable intellect, his insights into institutional behavior, his strong focus on the public good, and his humor. Certainly Bob is a sterling model for those who wish to advance public well-being.

At RFF, he continued his efforts to support our mission long after his time as president—indeed, even in the last weeks of his life. We are deeply grateful for his service. He will be missed by his many professional friends here.”

—Phil Sharp, president, RFF

“When the EPA was created in December 1970, we clearly needed someone with deep managerial experience. Fortunately for the country, EPA, and me, Bob Fri was available. He was nominated deputy administrator by the president and confirmed by the Senate. He performed in superior fashion in the agency’s formative years.

Bob was quiet, self-effacing, and extremely talented. His contributions to our country’s well-being are incalculable. People like Bob, whose enormous talent he consistently dedicated to the public interest, don’t come along very often. He will be sorely missed.”

—Bill Ruckelhaus, *the first administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency*

“I am honored to share some highlights of my friend Bob Fri’s time at the Smithsonian Institution. Bob served as director of the National Museum of Natural History from 1996 to 2001, opening significant exhibitions, strengthening research, expanding collections storage, and building the Advisory Board. Under his leadership, the museum opened to the public Geology, Gems, and Minerals; African Voices; Vikings—The North Atlantic Saga; and a renovated rotunda. Bob commissioned a review of the museum’s scientific activities and laid the groundwork for a 125,000-square-foot expansion of the Museum Support Center, for collections and laboratories. He remained a steadfast supporter of the museum, serving as a trusted mentor to subsequent directors, staff, and board members.”

—Roger Sant, *regent emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution and vice chairman of the Board of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History*

“Elected as a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2010, Bob Fri was deeply appreciated there for his extensive knowledge of energy policy and his astute leadership. As co-chair of the Alternative Energy Future project, Bob was an effective champion of the value of the social and behavioral sciences in understanding the social and regulatory barriers to the adoption of new energy technologies. We and all his collaborators will miss profoundly the wisdom, wit, vision, and generosity he brought to this and many other projects throughout his extraordinary career.”

—Jonathan F. Fanton, *president, American Academy of Arts and Sciences; and Maxine L. Savitz, co-chair, Alternative Energy Future project*

“Bob Fri made presiding over a think tank look easy. It isn’t. He made hiring the right people seem routine. It never is. He knew instinctively which of his subordinates’ mistakes to overlook and which to rectify. That’s a rare quality.

Bob was very smart and skilled but always self-effacing. He seemed serious but laughed easily and had a great sense of humor. When everyone around him was flapping wildly, Bob was absolutely unflappable. Most importantly, Bob Fri encouraged service—to one’s family, church, community, employer, and country. We could use many, many more just like him.”

—Paul R. Portney, *former president, RFF*

At the time of printing, we were saddened to learn of the deaths of two other members of the RFF family, Kenneth D. Frederick and Robert A. Young. We will offer tributes to these RFF legends in the next issue of *Resources*.