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Jeff Frieden Traded to New York! Celebrating 30 Years at Harvard

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by **Danielle Benaroché Gottesman**

Back in 2010, Jeffry Frieden—a die-hard New York Yankees fan—overheard a conversation between a passenger and a desk agent at Indianapolis International Airport. “Ma’am,” the passenger said, “I have to get to Fenway Park. My son is debuting tonight for the Boston Red Sox.” The agent shook her head, indicating there were no available spots left on the plane. The distraught father retreated to the departure lounge to inform his wife of the bad news.

“Next thing I know,” said Don Nava, “the agent calls me up and says, ‘We have two seats for you.’” Don and his wife Becky made it to Boston just in time to watch their son stand in front of the Green Monster to play in the Majors. That night, Daniel Nava hit a grand slam on the first ball that came his way, cementing him as the second rookie in Major League Baseball history to achieve a debut feat of such proportions.

For Jeffry Frieden—Stanfield Professor of International Peace at Harvard University, former chair of the Department of Government, and seat Samaritan—taking a later flight to allow the Navas to get to Fenway Park

on time was no big deal. But to the Nava family, it was an extraordinary act of kindness—one that illustrates so well the character of the highly esteemed man who, at the close of the spring semester, will end an illustrious academic chapter in Cambridge.



After a nearly 30-year-long tenure at Harvard, Frieden will return to Columbia University as a professor at his alma mater. He will be bringing with him a prolific and varied portfolio of hundreds of contributions—from books, journals, newspapers, and major media outlets, to podcasts, seminars, and conferences—among which include serving as the organizer of the **Political Institutions and Economic Policy Conference (PIEP)**, co-organizer of the **Alberto Alesina Seminar on Political Economy**, and devoted founder of a decades-running weekly political economy luncheon that draws participation from around the country. “For decades, the seminars, conferences, and groups [Frieden] leads have brought the best political economy research—and researchers—to Harvard, making it the stimulating place it is,” says James Snyder, Leroy B. Williams Professor of History and Political Science in Harvard’s Department of Government. Indeed, accolades abound when considering Frieden’s accomplishments, from publishing what **Michael Hirsh of The New York Times** called “one of the most comprehensive histories of modern capitalism yet written” with his 2006 book, *Global Capitalism: Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century*, to mentoring students across decades and disciplines.

“There was a vote, and we have decided he may not leave,” says Gary King, Weatherhead University Professor and director of the **Institute for Quantitative Social Science** (IQSS), with a wistful smile. “He is too important to the intellectual and social foundation of the place.

“Jeff,” says King, “is the adult in the room, the friend—and he cuts across fields in an important way. He ties everybody together, because he's the friendliest person you could meet; and his intellectual viewpoint and work span the divide between the two. It's not just that we're losing a valuable colleague, we're losing the glue.”

Frieden served as the chair of the Department of Government during what King acknowledges as “a very difficult time,” noting the pandemic as a moment punctuating “various national political movements that not only affected our graduate students, but also made it hard to keep everyone on the same political page. Jeff kept everyone on track, during protests and hard moments. He is a very trusted individual.”

While Frieden's character feels symbiotic with his accomplishments, the latter are known to venture into the unexpected. At a certain point over their years working alongside one another, King discovered Frieden's knack for languages, recalling an exchange with Alberto Alesina, Italian economist and former Nathaniel Ropes Professor of Political Economy at Harvard, as well as namesake of the aforementioned seminar series.

“Jeff speaks many languages quite well,” says King (in Frieden's own words, he is “fluent in written and spoken French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish; [and] marginally competent in Russian”). “Alberto said that he knew Jeff spoke some Italian, and Alberto's parents were in town visiting. Jeff said ‘hello’—and then, Alberto told me, he uttered something else in perfect Italian. Even though Alberto had known Jeff for decades, he was completely surprised by Jeff's ability to speak so well. That's Jeff's soft intelligence and his soft power.”

As a critical member of the organizing committee and faculty sponsor of the seminar series centered on “**research aimed at showing how**

differences among institutions affect political and economic outcomes,” Frieden’s co-organizers openly concur on the impact of his departure.

“Jeff is a pillar of our vibrant political economy community on campus,” says Pia Raffler, assistant professor of government at Harvard and organizing committee member for the Alberto Alesina Seminar. “I often find myself telling graduate students and colleagues ‘you should talk to Jeff about that’—even when their topic is, at face value, not related to [international political economy]. He’s such a great analytical thinker and generous mentor and advisor, that anyone remotely working on [political economy] themes is propelled by conversations with him. I know I am. He will leave a massive gap.”



An elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences since 2018, Frieden has broadly enriched those around him in myriad ways; and acutely, he has done so by serving as what Kenneth Shepsle, George D. Markham Research Professor of Government and a founding member of IQSS, calls “the linchpin for political economy at Harvard. Patrick McVay, director of business operations at IQSS and former Weatherhead Center director of finance, whose professional orbit has shared that of Frieden’s throughout Frieden’s distinguished Harvard career, affirms the revered professor’s contributions to both **the Weatherhead Center**, IQSS, and Harvard at large.

“He is hardly peripheral,” McVay says. “I’ve always felt Jeff treated me and my staff with a huge amount of respect. He has been one of these people who genuinely wanted to know what we thought, listened to us, and supported us.”

For Frieden’s collaborators, peers, and students, there remains the faint and potentially fantastical hope that he might one day return. “It is possible to go to New York,” says Gary King, “and it’s possible to come back.”

When asked if he recalled the day that Frieden gave up his seat in order to help Don Nava get to Boston, Nava says, “I’ll never forget it. You don’t forget something like that.” As with the gesture and the person behind it, an unforgettable legacy of greatness will stand in the wake of Frieden’s well-respected and unparalleled time at Harvard.



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