National Science Foundation (NSF) Director Arden Bement has named David Lightfoot the Foundation’s Assistant Director for the Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences. Lightfoot is currently Dean of the Graduate School for Arts and Sciences at Georgetown University. The appointment will begin June 1.

Lightfoot will oversee two NSF divisions and an annual budget of nearly $200 million. The SBE Directorate administers the agency’s research in a wide range of disciplines, including geography, anthropology, psychology, cognitive studies, political science, linguistics, risk management, and economics.

In announcing the appointment, Bement noted that the NSF is “delighted to have a scholar of David Lightfoot’s caliber directing this critically important element of NSF’s portfolio at a particularly propitious time. From the specter of terrorism to the tsunami devastation in the Far East to rapid social change and the ongoing global collision of cultures, the insights of social and behavioral research have never been more urgently needed.”

Lightfoot has authored ten books and several dozen scholarly papers on the origin, acquisition, development, and historical evolution of language. He received his bachelor’s degree from the University of London, King’s College, and his master’s and doctoral degrees from the University of Michigan. He has been a Fulbright Scholar, has received fellowships from the Ford Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies, and has received several research grants from NSF.

**Fiscal Year 2006 Federal Budget Released**

With much fanfare, the Bush Administration released its FY 2006 federal budget proposal. The document is by law only a recommendation to Congress, and lawmakers are unfailingly quick to revise the figures as they see fit. In trumpeting the massive document, the president and his team stressed the need for fiscal discipline throughout discretionary accounts unrelated to defense and homeland security. The total budget calls for $2.6 trillion in federal spending, below are brief capsules on two of the key agencies of interest to the geographic community.

**National Science Foundation:**

The NSF budget proposes total spending of $55.6 billion, an increase of $132 million (2.4 percent) over the current level. While this figure by no means maximizes the nation’s potential investment in science, NSF did fare markedly better than many domestic spending accounts that received cuts or were eliminated. The NSF’s Social, Behavioral, Economic Sciences Directorate is allocated only a 1 percent increase.

**U.S. Geological Survey:**

USGS would receive $934 million under the proposal, a decrease of 1.7 percent from the FY 2005 appropriation of $949 million. While this is disappointing, the Mapping, Remote Sensing, and Geographic Investigations account is slated to receive $139 million, a 16.8 percent increase over the current total of $119 million. The boost is due to the Administration’s commitment to USGS’s role in land observing systems. It would correct a Landsat 7 funding shortfall from previous years and allow USGS to begin work on an upgraded ground-processing system.

We will be monitoring these programs and others throughout the year as members of Congress develop binding appropriation figures.

**Lightfoot to Head NSF’s SBE Directorate**

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**Geography and the Congress Panel at AAG Meeting**

I am pleased to announce that a panel session on mapping federal policy issues and geography issues will be held as part of the AAG Annual Meeting in Denver. It will be entitled “Geography and the Congress” and will convene on Friday April 8 at 2:00 p.m. AAG Executive Director Douglas Richardson will chair the session, and panelists will include me; AAG Educational Affairs Director Michael Solem, Jim Geringer, the former Governor of Wyoming, and others.

**First Major Hearing on Tsunamis held by Senate**

On February 2, the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee held the first Congressional hearing on the South Asian Tsunami crisis and related issues. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN) and Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA) opened the session by briefing their colleagues on a trip they recently took to Sri Lanka to witness the devastation and help deliver U.S. aid. The panel featured top officials from the government agencies charged with detecting tsunami, studying their impacts and effects, and predicting their likelihood. NSF Director Arden Bement told the Committee that the NSF has sent “rapid-response” reconnaissance teams into the affected Indian Ocean areas to study the aftermath of the disaster. Charles “Chip” Groat, the Director of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), explained that his agency plans to improve their interpretive abilities for information related to earthquakes and tsunamis. He also noted that the predictive abilities for tsunamis are improving with better modeling.

Readers may be interested in an AAG Annual Meeting panel that Richard Marston will chair entitled “Geography and the South Asian Tsunami,” on Thursday, April 7 at 3:00 p.m. Panelists are Susan Cutter, Nathan Wood, David Skole, Robert Chen, and Bimal Kanti Paul.

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