

Transitions . . .

As we begin a new year and begin to close in on our 2004 Centennial Celebration I want to reflect briefly on a few transitions that will affect the Association of American Geographers (AAG). In particular, I would like to focus on transitions in leadership and changes in directions the Association may take.

The new year brings with it a new Executive Director for our organization. For more than 13 years, Ron Abler performed an outstanding job as Executive Director of the AAG. During Ron's tenure our organization's membership grew and its influence increased on numerous fronts. New partnerships were developed with various federal agencies, and geography's national and international presence increased significantly. Ron helped spearhead projects like the NASA-funded Global Change in Local Places Project that furthered the AAG and geography, and which continue to have impact on the discipline today. And, several new Ph.D. programs were developed with his strong support. Very deservedly, the AAG Council voted unanimously in Los Angeles to name the AAG Honors Service Award the Ronald F. Abler Honors for Distinguished Service. Ron, on behalf of a grateful organization, we thank you for your many, many contributions to the AAG!

Effective 1 January 2003, Douglas B. Richardson stepped in as our Executive Director. Doug is exactly the right person to take over as our Executive Director at this time in our history. He is very sensitive to the strong academic tradition in our association, and at the same time, he offers a new and important perspective on the future of the AAG and our discipline.

As we begin our 99th year as an organization, the AAG and our discipline must further position ourselves to play a more significant role in national and international debates and to take advantage of emerging opportunities on a variety of fronts. As I mentioned in an earlier column, we must leverage the explosive growth in new geographic technologies for the benefit of the discipline. We have

a unique opportunity to continue to build our reputation in various aspects of the infosphere, virtual worlds, and cybergeography; yet if we are not careful we will lose our centrality relative to these emerging areas to other disciplines.

In a related context, in his recent *Annals* article B.L. Turner II (92:1, p. 63) stated that questions about human-environmental relationships have been elevated throughout the academy and the public at large, and that geography has been recognized as possessing unusual strengths in human-environmental science. At the same time, there are calls for a geographic information science and earth system science, which are matched by calls for remote sensing science, as well as human-environmental science. It is how we as geographers, and in my particular case, how, as a geographer interested in remote sensing, GIScience, and rural sustainability I react to these emerging 'sciences,' and how well the discipline continues to integrate these various sciences, that at least in part, will influence geography and the role geographers will play in understanding future worlds.

At the same time, we must be more active in debates that relate to national and international policy. We should certainly be at the forefront in the data standards and access discussions, but we also need to position ourselves so that our opinions are sought out by the media on issues related to globalization and international security. The efforts of Doug Richardson and others to organize the "Mapping the News" conference last Fall in Washington, DC, and to coordinate the development of a new book on the *Geographical Dimensions of Terrorism* (with Tom Wilbanks and Susan Cutter) are important steps in this direction.

Then, too, we need to raise the visibility and influence of geography with groups such as the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), the AAAS, and other national forums that recognize and respect the input of people from our discipline. People like Billie Turner, Susan

Cutter, and Michael Goodchild are examples of geographers leading the way in this regard, but there are others that deserve such recognition as well. Geography must also have a regular presence at the AAAS and other such forums rather than participating on a more limited basis.

Geographers must continue to strengthen support for the discipline by the NSF, NASA, NGS, DOD, and related government agencies as well as private foundations. Doug has been a real advocate (with Ron Abler) in this regard, and Tom Baerwald as well as others at NSF, have been strong supporters of geographers who have submitted cutting edge research proposals.

Finally, as we approach our Centennial, it may be appropriate to consider changing our name—when Susan Cutter was President she proposed changing our name to the Association for the Advancement of Geography. The reaction of our membership to this proposal has been mixed. At the same time, in my tour of regional meetings this fall many members seemed to think changing the name to the American Association of Geographers or the American Association for Geography, has merit. Truly, when you look at the AAG today, we are certainly more than the Association of American Geographers, but are we ready for change that more accurately reflects our organization? I welcome your thoughts on any name change and its implications.

As our organization faces these changes, it is an exciting time to be a geographer. I hope that as a discipline and as an association, we will seize these opportunities and keep geography central to emerging sciences. I thank Ron Abler again for his role as our Executive Director and for leading the organization to this point in its history, and I urge each of you to support Doug Richardson as we work through this important time in our Association's history. ■

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