



# Newton D. Baker:

## *Pacifist became secretary of war, fought big business, then joined it*

By Robert G. McGruder

He was a paradox: Champion of the little guy and the big guy, Newton D. Baker was the cannon Tom L. Johnson used to fight the special interest and in later life he was hired gun of big corporations.

He was the pacifist who served as secretary of war.

Baker achieved a prominent place in Cleveland and national affairs as a lawyer, orator, administrator and politician.

He inherited the mantle of Johnson as reformer of local government and fighter for the underprivileged. He was a great spokesman for President Woodrow Wilson's programs and carried on the president's battle for the League of Nations.

Supporters promoted him for the presidency, but the man regarded as one of Ohio's most brilliant public servants, more brilliant than any of the seven sons who were elected president and made Ohio the mother of mediocrity, apparently never wanted the job.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes called Baker the outstanding lawyer of his generation. As an orator he was said to be the equal of William Jennings Bryan. A small, boyish-looking man who sometimes was almost blocked from view by the podium, he could capture and sway almost any audience with an effortless flow of words that appealed to reason before emotion.

During his active life Baker was law director and mayor of Cleveland, secretary of war, trustee of half a dozen colleges, appointee to national and international boards and commissions by Presidents Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt, director of the Cleveland Trust Co., RCA Corp., the National Broadcasting Co., the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad and many other large corporations; member and/or director of dozens of local civic committees, trustee of the Carnegie Corp., Woodrow Wilson and Cleveland foundations and other philanthropic efforts. The list went on and on.

Great men in America and around the world sent words of tribute when he died Christmas Day, 1937.

Baker was born Dec. 3, 1871, in Martinsburg, W. Va. His father was a physician, a scholarly man who passed on his love of literature to studious Newton, the second of his four sons. Baker's father served with Jeb Stuart's 1st Virginia Cavalry in the Civil War and later became secretary of the state board of health in West Virginia.

Newton wanted to be a doctor, too. He entered Johns Hopkins University in 1889 and received his B.A. degree in 1892. By then he had put aside thoughts of being a doctor. He had learned he was unable to perceive depth of color, a necessary skill for a surgeon, and his father had advised him to find other work.

During a postgraduate year at Johns Hopkins, Baker took a course taught by Woodrow Wilson, a visiting professor from Princeton. They lived in the same boarding house and Baker was profoundly impressed by Wilson.

In 1894 Baker received his law degree from Washington and Lee University.

After more than a year of practicing law for very few clients, Baker went to work as secretary to Postmaster General William L. Wilson, a fellow West Virginian.

When the Grover Cleveland administration ended in 1896, out went Postmaster Wilson and Baker. Baker went on a vacation to Europe, intending to return to his law practice. On the return voyage he met Judge Martin A. Foran of Cleveland. Impressed by Baker's intellect, the older man suggested he practice law in Cleveland.

Frederick C. Howe, Baker's classmate at Johns Hopkins, had moved to Cleveland several years before,

and Howe encouraged his friend in 1899 to accept an offer to join Foran's firm.

Foran was a power in Democratic politics and a vigorous campaigner. One evening he was scheduled to make a speech but was ill. He sent young Baker in his place and a political career was launched. His speech attracted the attention of Mayor Tom L. Johnson.

Johnson appointed Baker first assistant law director in 1902 and when the top job became vacant it went to Baker.

A reform movement was capturing the country at the turn of the century. In the forefront was Cleveland, led by Johnson, a reformed robber baron who had decided that the real struggle was not for privilege but against it.

Johnson preached and sought economic and political change, getting government and resources out of the hands of monopolies and special interests and into the hands of the people.

He gathered about him a group of brilliant young men and political toughs who believed in his struggle. Baker, Howe and the rest loved and believed in cities, especially Cleveland. Unemployment, poverty and crime did not have to exist, they believed.

Baker became law director in 1902. When the post was made an elective office in 1903 he won the job. He was re-elected in 1905, 1907 and 1909. He was the legal genius behind Johnson's fight for lower streetcar fares and public control of the street railways and the waterfront.

Cleveland turned on Johnson eventually and he and his cabinet were defeated in 1909. Baker, however, won and continued as law director. In 1911 he was elected mayor, piling up a majority of 17,838 votes, the largest in the city's history. He was re-elected in 1913 by about 4,000 votes.

As mayor, Baker was responsible for the establishment of the Municipal Light Plant, which added the three-cent light to the three-cent carfare, and he led the successful fight to bring about home rule for cities.

Johnson referred to the 5-foot-6, 125-pound Baker as "my little mental giant." In his autobiography, "My Story," Johnson said of Baker:

"Mr. Baker, though the youngest of us all, was really the head of the cabinet and principal adviser. He has been an invaluable public servant, having been returned to office at each succeeding election, even in

1909 when I was defeated with a majority of our ticket. Newton Baker, as a lawyer, was pitted against the biggest lawyers of the state. No other solicitor ever had the number of cases crowded into his office in the same length of time, nor so large a crop of injunctions to respond to, and in my judgment there is not another man in the state who could have done the work so well."

Baker began to get national recognition at the Democratic National Convention in Baltimore in 1912. He led a fight against the unit rule, opposing Ohio Gov. Judson Harmon, a candidate for president. Baker won the battle, releasing 18 votes for his man, Woodrow Wilson.

Wilson offered Baker the post of secretary of the interior in 1913 but Baker declined. After serving out his term as mayor, Baker retired to practice law.

Wilson called on him again in 1916, offering him the position of secretary of war, a strange choice by Wilson since Baker was a pacifist. Many found it even stranger that Baker accepted.

A little more than a year after Baker became secretary, war was declared against Germany and Baker was responsible for raising an army, training and equipping it and sending it to Europe.

While there was constant, often vicious criticism of his handling of the war effort, there was never a hint of scandal. His work was recognized in 1928 when he was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. It could have come earlier but one of Baker's last acts as secretary of war was to remove his name from the list of persons to receive citations.

At the end of the Wilson administration in 1920, Baker returned to Cleveland and the law firm he had started in 1916 with Thomas L. Sidlo and Joseph C. Hostetler. (Now called Baker, Hostetler & Patterson.) For the rest of his life he was regarded as one of the nation's finest lawyers.

Old friends from the Johnson days were sometimes amazed that Baker used his talents mostly for utilities and other giants of the type he used to fight so well.

When Wilson died, Baker became the spokesman for his idealism and his belief in a League of Nations. In every speech he made he included a plea for the league and for world cooperation to end war.

The Democrats were looking for a candidate to run against President Herbert Hoover in 1931 and many thought Baker would have the best



Newton D. Baker—1932 portrait.

chance of defeating the incumbent. He was considered a dark horse at the 1932 Democratic National Convention. But Baker would not run and did not attend the convention.

"He didn't want it," said his son, Newton D. Baker III, in a recent interview. "His health wasn't good and he felt he was not able to do the job."

Baker was recognized as the leader of the local Democratic party after the death of Johnson until his own death. He had many doubts about the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was lukewarm toward the New Deal in 1934 and became a severe critic by 1936. He was a bitter foe of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Baker had his detractors. Most were people who resented his apparent move away from the principles of Johnson. He had inherited the mantle, they said, and then sold out to Johnson's enemies.

In 1932, when Baker was being talked about as a possible presidential candidate, Oswald Garrison Villard, the militant editor of "The Nation," wrote: "Just another politician and orator without fixed principles, veering to the winds if the necessity arises or there is an opportunity to take office or make money — this is Newton D. Baker."

Villard recalled that when Baker was fighting to establish Muncy Light he appeared before the Chamber of Commerce and said: "I am in the house of have. I appeal on behalf of the house of want — for justice."

Two years later Baker resigned his membership in the house of have because that house was opposing a bill to permit the cities of Ohio to enter into competition with privately owned utilities, Villard said.

But Baker returned to the Chamber of Commerce in 1916, became a director in 1921 and president in 1922, Villard said. The Chamber of Commerce didn't change. Baker did.

Furthermore, when Newton Baker became president of the House of Have it was engaged in the popular "big-business" fight of smashing the unions," Villard wrote. "The House of Have published page advertisements in the newspapers demanding the open shop in Cleveland, and those advertisements were signed by that great liberal, Newton D. Baker."

Villard found good qualities. "He is kindly, pleasant to meet, modest, and personally unassuming. He has, moreover, in great abundance what some Frenchmen have declared to be the most beautiful thing in the world — patience."

"Quite unlike Mr. Hoover, Baker is the philosopher a public man should be when it comes to public criticism. He neither makes a hair shirt of it, nor has he been known to explode with anger. His own life is beyond criticism. He exemplifies all the familiar Christian virtues."

John W. Raper, humorist, political scold and columnist for the Press, expressed the feelings of many of the spiritual children of Tom Johnson in a speech before the City Club in 1935.

Raper said Baker "was lifted from the obscurity of a law office to a public position by the greatest man that Cleveland ever produced. Tom L. Johnson. He had a grace of manner and a melodious voice that he raised in advocacy of the principles that were dear to the great leader and when the great man passed on, his mantle was placed upon the shoulders of the eloquent young follower."

But, said Raper, the follower began shedding principles, first when he, the country's outstanding pacifist, accepted the post of secretary of war.

"After the war he put the principles of Tom L. Johnson into his pocket, turned his back on the House that Has Not and went over to the House that Has and Wants More," Raper said.

Baker's son said that some of the people who were associated with Johnson were quite "radical." He cited Peter Witt, a tough labor organizer and uncompromising opponent of privilege who referred to the Union Club as "The Onion Club."

"I don't think he became more conservative," said Baker's son. "I think it just became apparent to people the difference between my father and Witt."



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John C. Weadock, general counsel for the Commonwealth Southern Corp., left, Newton D. Baker, representing 18 utilities, and Wendell Willkie, president of Commonwealth Southern, in their fight on the TVA as hearings opened in the 1930s.

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