

NEWTON D. BAKER

By Frederick P. Keppel

NEWTON BAKER, though a seasoned public servant, was far from being what is called a national figure when he went to Washington as Secretary of War in March 1916; and on the Atlantic seaboard at least, the appointment definitely offended our folkways. Of course the new Secretary had to be a Democrat, but here was clearly the wrong kind of Democrat. He came from Cleveland, not a good sign in itself, where he had been the disciple and successor of Tom Johnson; he had found nothing better to tell the Washington reporters at his first interview than that he was fond of flowers; and he belonged to peace societies (so did his predecessor, Elihu Root, but that was different). Could Woodrow Wilson have done worse had he tried?

Few of us changed our minds about Baker within the first months of his service. Yet at the Armistice he stood without question in the front rank of our citizens; and in direct violation of the rule that in an ungrateful democracy service in a national emergency is to be quickly forgotten, the years remaining to him were ones of steadily growing reputation. His death on Christmas Day last drew forth unique expressions of admiration and affection from all sections, all parties, and all classes. And yet the man who had died was the same man who came to Washington in 1916, ripened by time and by great responsibilities it is true, but the same man. The change was in ourselves. My effort here is an attempt to trace the steps and to set forth the reasons for that change.

The story of his administration of the War Department has been told by Frederick Palmer in "Newton D. Baker: America at War," and told with sympathy and understanding; we cannot reach our objective by briefly repeating that story, nor can we reach it by comparing Baker's record with that of his predecessors in wartime, and for two reasons: first, the vastness of the undertaking in 1917-18 threw all previous experience out of scale; and second, our military organization had, since the Spanish War, been re-created "under Elihu Root's counselling intelligence" — to use Baker's own phrase. What I set out to do is much more personal in character, and the task has not proved to be an easy one. Natural gifts and long practice had indeed made Baker one of our outstanding public speakers, and a volume of wartime

addresses collected by his friends in 1918, "Frontiers of Freedom,"¹ provides fruitful reading, as do the addresses which later found their way into print, including his greatest effort — the eloquent and deeply moving plea for the recognition of the League of Nations made at the Democratic Convention of 1924. It is true, also, that no adequate collection of American state papers could fail to include a few of his departmental writings (in general, these are to be found in Palmer's book) and that there are other important writings of his — to which reference will be made later on. The entire printed record, however, tells us but little about the man himself, for the good reason that when he spoke in public or wrote for publication the very last thing in his thoughts was Newton Baker. With his genius for friendship, he was, as Raymond Fosdick has pointed out, one of the few remaining exponents of an almost lost art, that of letter writing, and it would have been much more to our present purpose if his voluminous and many-sided correspondence had been available.

It has really been by something like a process of elimination that I have been brought to seek the nature and degree of Baker's influence and the steady growth of his renown, not in the printed record, but rather by gathering together the impressions he made upon all sorts and conditions of men in direct personal contact. Inevitably my thoughts went back to the early days of the war, when I saw him daily and nightly, and what has come to me after these twenty years is no steady stream of recollection, but rather a cavalcade of separate incidents, of figures singly or in groups crossing the stage of memory — each individual as he left the scene carrying away some impression of the man.

Let me try to reconstruct a typical day in his office in the late spring or summer of 1917. At 8.30 A.M. Herbert Putnam might arrive, and in five minutes the Secretary would understand both the wisdom and the practicability of libraries in the training camps of our citizen army, and of having the books later accompany the soldiers to France. Next, a Plattsburg enthusiast who had come to scold might find himself, much to his astonishment, remaining to listen and learn; or some fellow liberal would have to be disabused of the idea that the war was a heaven-sent experimental laboratory for some pet social theory. Fosdick would drop in to go over some point about camp facilities, or Tardieu about the available ports of debarkation in France, or General Bridges

¹ New York: Doran, 1918.

about temporary provision for our soldiers in England. Big business and transportation and labor would have their representatives, and members of Congress were always in the anteroom, insistent on prerogative in direct proportion, it seemed to us, to the unimportance or impropriety of their purpose. At noon Baker would come out to give at least a handshake and a smile, often an understanding word, to the scores of private visitors for whom it was physically impossible to arrange private appointments. Then home to luncheon with his wife and children, his one act of self-indulgence. Afterward, there might be a quiet hour with Dr. Welch of Johns Hopkins on what modern medical care might contribute to the health of the soldiers. On such occasions he was not to be interrupted, however loudly the heathen might rage in the anteroom. Meanwhile, throughout the day and in the evening the Chief of Staff and the Bureau Chiefs were of course demanding and receiving a full share of his time. In between he somehow managed to conduct an immense correspondence, the formal signing of the departmental mail sometimes taking the better part of an hour, and many of the letters and memoranda he must needs prepare himself being none too easy to compose. The sound of the Provost Marshal General's crutches in the hall told us it was 10 P.M. We could almost set our watches by him, for Crowder (whose wounds, by the way, had been received not in battle but in falling from a Pullman berth) had promptly learned the value of a daily discussion on the problems of a nation-wide draft with this son of a Confederate soldier, who had been raised in a small town, whose student days had been passed in Baltimore and Lexington, and who for fourteen years had been a public officer in Cleveland.

As the long days succeeded one another there were occasional calls from President Wilson, who never announced his coming and never stayed long; and almost daily meetings with Secretary Daniels and other Cabinet officers. One day we would have a phalanx of college presidents, who saw their students melting away and who wanted their institutions taken over — or at least financed — as training camps. On another, a delegation from a city not necessary to name might come to challenge the authority of the War Department to mend their morals for them just because a divisional camp was to be established nearby. In this case the Secretary conceded that the point of law was well taken, and suggested the wholly unwelcome alternative of changing the location of the camp. On still another day our T.V.A. of today

was, I remember, born in a discussion regarding the sources of power for a nitrogen fixation plant great enough to ensure an unlimited supply of explosives. Once the Secretary scandalized us by explaining *in German* the intricacies of the draft law to a delegation of Hutterian Brethren, an offshoot of the Mennonites. Another time former Secretary of State Elihu Root came to discuss the Mission to Russia. Officers ordered to France had to be slipped in secretly to say goodbye. I can recall taking the future Chief of Staff, General March, out on a balcony and in through a window of the Secretary's private office. Then there were official receptions for generals and statesmen from overseas, conducted with the active and, to us juniors, not always welcome, advice and counsel of the State Department. The frequent meetings of the Council of National Defense also were held in Baker's office and made cruel demands on his time, though they doubtless served their purpose. And, of course, there were many calls to take him outside of his office — Cabinet meetings, Congressional committees, visits to nearby training camps.

And this kind of thing went on all day and every day from eight-thirty in the morning until eleven at night (only two or three hours less on Sunday), but nothing that happened could ever ruffle the tranquillity of the Secretary. How the favorite disciple of the excitable Tom Johnson could maintain throughout the alarums and excursions of wartime Washington this calm imperturbability was beyond our comprehension.

During this period Baker made one hasty trip overseas. Though naturally different, his days there were just as strenuous as those in Washington. Our officers behind the lines were proud of the docks and warehouses and hospitals they were building, and those at the front wanted to show him the morale and appearance of their men. Their determination that the Secretary should see all with his own eyes meant long and arduous trips, between which must be found time for serious discussions. That these discussions were fruitful, we have the public evidence of General Harbord and Charles G. Dawes, Pershing's right-hand citizen soldier; Sir Arthur Salter has told me that it was directly due to Baker's quiet but effective presentation of the situation that the British Government diverted so large a proportion of their ships from highly profitable trade routes to transport our soldiers and supplies.

Slowly at first, and then with increasing rapidity, the picture at Washington changed. Into the service of the War Department

itself, men of affairs, accustomed to making decisions rather than passing the buck, were being absorbed. Outside it, the direction of the various war boards and war administrations fell into competent hands. Other Federal departments, notably the Treasury, were strengthened by the acquisition of men of first-rate ability. As a result, the direct pressure of non-military matters upon the Secretary of War was correspondingly lightened, and he could concentrate his attention on the problems which came to him not *via* the public reception room but through the door connecting his office with that of the Chief of Staff.

Until the end of 1917, however, no clear distinction could be drawn in Baker's daily work between his military and his civilian activities. He had, in fact, to stand between and, so far as possible, to reconcile two very different human attitudes. The military way of thinking and acting is based on long tradition; instinctively, it avoids lights and shades and doubts; while there might be private jealousies, the Army thought and acted essentially as a unit. The American people, on the other hand, were far from united in 1917. Many were definitely hostile to the whole enterprise, many more were at that time indifferent; certain elements were already outdoing Ludendorff himself in war spirit; very few had any conception of what war really meant. In the task of building up an Army the civilian attitude put much more emphasis than the military upon applications of new scientific knowledge, upon matters of comfort and health, physical and mental, and social and recreational services of all sorts. It recognized, as the Army did not at first, the repercussions upon civil life, that the War Department, for example, was becoming the country's largest employer of civilian labor. It was the Secretary's task to bring about a fusion of these two strains, and the degree of his success may be measured by the fact that the United States was able to build up a great Army, whose courage and endurance were beyond question, whose health record, despite the influenza epidemic, was extraordinary, and whose behavior was the best in the world's history. Two years after the call which brought four million men to the colors, there were actually fewer soldiers in military prisons than there had been when that call was issued. It was, as well, an Army which it proved possible to reabsorb into civil life without undue confusion and difficulty.

Curiously enough, Baker the pacifist won the confidence of the Army officers before he enjoyed that of the public at large. Or

perhaps this is not so strange after all. Few men in the Army or the Navy are militarists in the sense that our super-patriots deserve the title. It is no wonder that he and Tasker Bliss, scholar and philosopher as well as soldier, should achieve a prompt meeting of minds; but his success, though not so immediate, was equally complete with the more conventional type of professional soldier. Even before the outbreak of war the Bureau Chiefs with civilian responsibilities, men like McIntyre of the Insular Bureau and Black of the Engineers, had found him a Secretary after their own hearts, who had the brains and industry to understand the matter in hand, who in consultation with them would reach a decision, and having reached it would stay put. Of Crowder's conversion I have already spoken, and we know that all these men passed the word along to their fellow officers in the combat branches who had not come into contact with the Secretary.

As to the civilian attitude, on the other hand, we had only to read the daily and weekly press (when we had the chance) to know that outside the Department there was widespread misunderstanding of the Secretary, and more than one center of implacable hostility. It was hard for us to judge whether the countless civilian visitors were exerting an influence in his favor, for, in general, after their visits they promptly left our sight. One very important type of civilian, however, remained under our observation. Baker was incredibly patient but quite firm with the members of Congress who wanted favors for constituents, and little by little it became recognized that though the Secretary's quiet No might be disappointing, no one else would receive a different answer to the same question. In his relations with the two Committees on Military Affairs the picture is somewhat different. Here the Secretary, in his desire to defend his military associates from charges which he knew to be unfair, showed himself rather too skillful as a counsel for the defense to permit the establishment of an early *entente cordiale*. With the more thoughtful members, however, and notably with Senator Wadsworth and Representative Kahn, Republican leaders of Democratic committees though they were, a basis of mutual respect and confidence was established and maintained throughout the war.

The culminating event of this first period of Baker's war administration was his account of his stewardship to the Senate Committee on Military Affairs on January 28, 1918. (twenty years ago, to the day, as this is being written). This was the occasion

to which the anti-Bakerites had been looking forward in order to "get" the Secretary and force his resignation. Baker, be it said, recognized the good faith and patriotic motives of the great majority of his critics (there were exceptions to be sure, but these didn't count in his mind). He himself was far from satisfied with the progress that had been made in certain essential services and, if it were made evident that a change in direction would be in the public interest, he was just as ready to step aside as when he had offered to resign his place in the Cabinet upon Wilson's re-election. But his testimony revealed such an amazing grasp of the problem as a whole — and in all its parts — so clear a picture of pending difficulties and of the steps being taken to surmount them, that the more thoughtful of his critics saw at once that in going farther for a Secretary of War the country might well do much worse; and though criticism was to continue, this day marked the turning point in the civilian attitude.

At the time, as I have said, we knew only dimly and in part what kind of picture all these people who saw the Secretary of War were taking away with them — soldiers, legislators, scientists, professional and business folk of all sorts — how they described him to their wives that night. But in retrospect, and in the light of Baker's later reputation, which must of necessity have been built up in large part on just this basis, I can, I think, present a pretty fair composite sketch.

His visitors arrived expecting to see a functionary, with all that this implies. They found a man short in stature, fragile in build, who never raised his voice in protest or command, never clenched his fist, never lost his temper. They found a man as completely selfless as it is possible for a human being to be, who instantly and instinctively assumed the other man's sincerity of purpose. Needless to say, this led to occasional disappointments and disillusion, but these were rare and they never embittered his reception of the next visitor. A common meeting ground for discussion was promptly established, and a well-furnished mind, clarity of understanding, and an amazing power of exposition were placed at their service, and at their service as of right and not by favor. But there was, I am sure, something more than these recognizable and more or less measurable qualities to be reckoned with — something intangible, something rich and rare in the man's personality which made his friendship a major event in one's experience. When in the spring of 1917 Theodore Roose-

velt referred publicly to Baker as "exquisitely unfitted to be Secretary of War," he builded better than he knew in the selection of his adverb, if not of the word which followed it; "exquisite" is the *mot juste* to characterize that delicate combination of personal qualities which had so much to do with Baker's power.

If I had to choose the one quality in his make-up which exercised the most potent influence upon soldier and civilian alike, it would be his courage, an undramatic but imaginative courage, broad enough to cover both a gallant recklessness and a philosophic fortitude. His effective support of the Selective Draft demanded that sort of courage, particularly from so recent a convert to its necessity. To set the pattern of American participation upon so vast and costly a scale took both imagination and courage. And certainly, to break all American tradition by giving the General in the field a free hand and protecting him from criticism meant both courage and fortitude. It was Pershing who kept Leonard Wood on this side of the Atlantic; it was Baker who silently received the resulting storm of protest.

The day-by-day administration of his office gave him many other opportunities to show his mettle. In the general confusion, Congress had adjourned in March 1917 without enacting necessary Army Appropriation Bills; yet for weeks the Secretary by "wholesale, high-handed and magnificent violation of law" (to quote Ralph Hayes) placed contracts for scores of millions of dollars without a vestige of legal authority. Later on, in the selection of officers to fill key positions in the United States, he bided his time, perhaps he overbided it; but when in his judgment the day had come to act, he acted with cool courage. To pass over the entire Quartermaster Corps with its special training, and to choose as Chief of Procurement a retired Engineer officer took courage, even though the man selected was the builder of the Panama Canal, George Goethals. Today it is no secret that in selecting Peyton March as Chief of Staff at a crucial moment the Secretary followed his personal judgment rather than that of his military advisers. March was recognized as a man of the first ability, but to say that he was not popular with his fellow officers is to put it conservatively, and it took something more than courage to make the appointment, for the Secretary quite accurately foresaw that thenceforth many things would be done not as he himself would do them, but in a very different fashion, and that his would be the task of binding the wounds to be in-

flicted right and left by a relentless Chief of Staff. There can be no question, however, that this selection, and the free hand he thereafter gave to March to reach his objectives in his own way, did much to hasten the termination of the war.

Let me give one final example of Baker's fortitude. After the Armistice the President asked him to be a member of the Peace Commission, an invitation he would have rejoiced to accept, not only because he had something to contribute, but because he sensed, I feel sure, that his presence might have another value, for the President was always at his best with Baker. His clear mind realized, however, that his own war job was only half done, that two million men had to be looked after until they could be shipped back from France, and that these and two million others must be reabsorbed into civil life; there was no shade of hesitation or regret when once more he quietly said No.

It would be no kindness to Baker's memory to maintain that there was no ground for criticism of his administration, and it would indeed ill become a member of his personal staff to do so, for in the earlier days we ourselves were critical enough. We loved him for his faults, but we were sure that the faults themselves were grievous: outrageous overwork; too much tobacco; hours spent in suffering fools, if not gladly, at least with reprehensible patience; over-consideration of the feelings of the unimportant; and, worst of all, a habit of watching and waiting and listening when the situation in our own judgment demanded a prompt and brilliant decision. It was only later on that we could see that his sense of timing was much better than either his friends or foes could realize. It was only in retrospect, too, that we could give him credit for the double gift, so rare in an executive, of leaving some things alone and of seeing that other things didn't happen.

After the war there came four occasions for looking backward; each in its own way throws light on Baker's reputation. The change in national administration in 1921 brought in its train the inevitable official inquiries which sought to find evidence of wrongdoing and particularly of corruption in the conduct of a war which had cost more than \$1,000,000 an hour to conduct. The net result of the 37 charges considered by the War Transactions Section of the Department of Justice was two convictions and two pleas of guilty, all in relatively minor cases. As Mark Sullivan put it, "All the charges and all the slanders against Baker's management of the war collapsed or evaporated or were

disinfected by time and truth." The next two occasions were more or less accidental, but none the less significant. The first was the appearance in the American supplement of the "Encyclopædia Britannica" in 1922, of a seemingly malicious article on Baker. He himself refused to get excited about the matter. In fact, he wrote to a friend: "I am not so concerned as I should be, I fear, about the verdict of history . . . it seems to me unworthy to worry about myself, when so many thousands participated in the World War unselfishly and heroically who will find no place at all in the records which we make up and call history." His friends, however, rallied to his defense, and the result was a flood of published letters from men who knew at first hand of the Secretary and his work. A meeting of the American Legion in Cleveland in 1930 revealed his popularity with enlisted men as well as officers.

Finally in the preëlection year of 1931 there was the customary scanning of the horizon for presidential timber. Newton Baker was obviously in the line of vision, and there was much discussion of his qualifications. In these discussions it became clear that to some degree the sides had shifted: certain of his former liberal and radical supporters found the middle-aged lawyer with a large corporation practice wanting in qualities they had admired in Tom Johnson's City Solicitor, and said so in the condescending style which reformers permit themselves. On the other hand, journals and writers that had been openly anti-Baker in 1917 came out strongly in his favor. Baker himself took no part in the proceedings. He hadn't the slightest intention of going gunning for the nomination. Whether he would have accepted it had it been offered, I do not know. As a good party man, he might have done so, but on the other hand he had already had intimation that his heart had been seriously affected by the strain put upon it fifteen years earlier, and this might well have settled the question in his mind.

In writing for this quarterly, certainly, the question of Baker's interest in foreign affairs must not be overlooked. In his university days he had been a student of history, and thereafter, no one knows how, he had kept up his reading. War itself is perforce an international enterprise, and to keep our forces in France together and under our own flag took constant and difficult diplomatic negotiations with our Allies. It is the general testimony that the leaders from other lands whom he met in Washington and elsewhere both understood and admired him, and I have a theory that one of the reasons, a reason of which he himself was

quite unconscious, was that like Dwight Morrow of his own generation, like Irving and Hawthorne in the last century, Baker has his place in the line headed by Franklin and Jefferson, the line of those who stand as living demonstrations that one can be as authentically and refreshingly American as Uncle Sam himself, while at the same time conforming to the standards of quiet good manners and sharing *la culture générale* of the Old World.

But it must be added that in his relation to foreign affairs, as in other matters, Baker declines to be subdivided, even in retrospect. His internationalism is only one reflection, though an important one, of an underlying and indivisible faith in our common human nature and faith in the power of ideas. He was no more interested — and no less — in the problem of a coerced minority in the Danubian region than of the corresponding troubles of a Negro group in an American city. He would work with equal ardor toward a joint understanding between China and Japan, or to bring Protestants, Catholics and Jews together here at home.

To understand the years remaining to Newton Baker after he left Washington in 1921 one essential factor must be kept in mind. It would be easy to picture him as a professor in any one of half a dozen fields of scholarship, or as a diplomat, or editor, or executive; but his choice of the law as his life-work, made as a very young man, was as authentic a "call" as any man has ever had to the ministry. He had scarcely started on its practice, however, when he was drawn into the public service, in which he was to remain with hardly a break for a score of years. His return to Cleveland was above all a return to his first love. There was no lack of reciprocal affection on the part of the law, and as a result all his other activities were conditioned upon having to fight for the time he could devote to them.

That his mind was constantly at work upon questions of peace and war there is abundant evidence. Take for example the following passage from his Memorial Address at Woodrow Wilson's tomb in 1932:

The conference at Paris demonstrated that the sense of victory does not create a favorable atmosphere for the construction of just and enduring peace. The portions of the Treaty of Versailles that were dictated by the spirit of victory are largely the parts of that treaty which still obstruct peace. Nations, like men, have emotions, are sensitive to hurts to their pride, and in moments of passion submerge their better selves.

The only sort of peace which can endure must come from a recognition of virtues as springs of national action as well as guides for individual behavior.

The future peace of the world cannot be secured by processes which attain diplomatic successes and inflict diplomatic defeats, which inflame nations with a sense of aggrandizement or humiliate them with a sense of wounded pride.

And somehow he found time to do not a little serious writing. In "War and the Modern World,"² the memorial lecture for 1935, he paid the boys of Milton Academy the compliment of giving them his best. "Why We Went to War," first published in this review,³ was really a *tour de force*, of which he himself was naïvely proud. The outward and visible sign of this self-challenge to do a thoroughly scholarly job despite an overwhelming pressure of other tasks was a second desk moved into his office, and piled high with volumes and reports. How and when he found the time to digest the material and write the treatise remains a mystery.

I shall not enumerate his services on national commissions or on private boards, educational, philanthropic and professional, except the Wickersham Commission of 1929, and those on Unemployment Relief in 1930, and on the Army Air Corps in 1934. They drew heavily upon energies which by this time it was all too evident he should have been conserving.

No man in his senses would add all these things to the engrossing demands of an active law practice; but then I am not maintaining the thesis that he had any sense — about himself. He didn't, and there was nothing to do about it. Those of us who, following a British precedent, had organized a Society for the Preservation of Newton Baker, got no coöperation whatever from the subject of our solicitude, and we decided before long that the pain of refusal might really be worse for him than the additional strain of acceptance. From time to time during the last few years he did give up some voluntary service, and made a great virtue of it, but he never failed to replace this by at least two others.

Before the reader lays down this article, I should like him to know that it is not what I myself had meant it to be — namely, an appraisal of a public service, sympathetic naturally, but dispassionate. It has turned rather into a tribute of personal affection. All I can say in extenuation is that the very same thing would have happened had the editor of FOREIGN AFFAIRS selected for the task any other of Baker's associates.

² Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935.

³ FOREIGN AFFAIRS, v. 15, n. 1. Later published as a book by the Council on Foreign Relations.

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