

HE GUIDES the NATION'S ARMY

THIS is a sketch of
Newton D. Baker,
President Wilson's new
Secretary of War, for-
merly Mayor of
Cleveland.

NEWTON D. BAKER, "I had been told by a man well acquainted with him, 'is the kind of thoroughly good citizen we all approve of highly—and fall to imitate! He has lofty ideals. He has high principles. He is utterly sincere. He is simple and unaffected both in thought and life. He has a clear, well-disciplined mind. He has an extraordinary command of concise and effective speech. Without being in the least effusive, he is a good mixer. You will find him full of charm. Out in Cleveland he lived in a modest frame house with his wife and three children, smoked pipe tobacco in a 25-cent pipe, drove his own Ford, and for amusement read Greek and Latin books on the street cars.' Thus runs an article by Rowland Thomas in the New York World.

"It is interesting to notice," my informant added, "that he is the second of Tom Johnson's disciples to be lifted into prominence by President Wilson. Brand Whitlock is the other. It is hardly exaggeration to say that Brand Whitlock, in Belgium, has proved himself a great man. Will Baker be as successful in the war department? Frankly, much as I like him personally, I am wondering whether he will measure up to the job. What he has done he has done well. But—he has never been tested out in really big affairs. Has he the capacity for them? You know a .38-caliber revolver may be a perfect weapon—as a revolver—but fall lamentably if pressed into service as a seacoast gun! Is Newton D. Baker big enough to be secretary of war at a time like this? That's what I'm asking myself. That's what the country is asking itself, I think."

Naturally those remarks ran through my head as I talked with the new secretary of war last week. I saw him twice, once in his modest bedroom at the University club, where he is living for the present as a bachelor "because the children are in school in Cleveland and we don't want to break into their year." The second time he was in his office in the war department, the office to which one penetrates through that dread antechamber where hang the portraits of all the previous incumbents of the office.

On both occasions I got the same impression of the physical man. Nature, in molding his body, did a neat job. He is a markedly small man, but in proportion all the way through. His littleness carries no suggestion of the dwarfish. His head is large, but not enough so to make him look top-heavy. His hands and feet are of moderate size, well formed and muscular. He has a chest big enough to breathe in, a waist which carries no adipose luggage. His skin is swarthy, his hair black and straight. A pair of hazel eyes full of life, but comprehensive rather than keen; the wide mouth of an orator or actor, mobile yet firm of lip; the brow of a scholar; a face in general in which the perpendicular lines of strength are accentuated, a manner at once dignified and friendly, a bearing which I should call attentive rather than alert—these are the characteristics of the outward man.

His mentality is not so easily characterized. I shall have to try to bring it out for you in a series of rather detached glimpses, as he himself revealed it to me in the course of our conversation. Our talk ranged over many topics. We had, for instance, been speaking of the extraordinary amount of reading of standard English authors he had done before he was twenty years old, and I asked him whether the familiarity of his mother tongue thus acquired had not been an important element in his various successes. He said: "I think that is true. Ability to express myself effectively in speech has been of great value to me."

This led to a brief sketch of his personal history. Mr. Baker was born in 1871 in Martinsburg, W. Va., a community of 9,000 persons, wherein his father was the leading physician. He was the second of four sons. At the age of twenty, in 1891, he received his degree of Bachelor of Arts from Johns Hopkins university, having completed the four years course in three years. Followed a year of graduate work in Roman law, comparative jurisprudence and economics, and then his law course, which he took at Washington and Lee university, completing the two years' work in one year. "That compression," he told me, "was done for family reasons. Money was not plentiful in a country doctor's family, and there were other sons to educate." After his graduation in 1893 Mr. Baker hung out his shingle in Martinsburg to indicate that he was "willing to practice law," as he puts it, and remained in that receptive condition until 1896, the last year of the Cleveland administration, when Postmaster General Wilson called him to Washington to be his private secretary. "I divided my two cases between the other members of the local bar," he told me, "and went."

In 1899 Mr. Baker was invited to come to Cleveland, O., as a partner with Foran & McTigue, one of the city's leading firms of trial lawyers. He went there, met Tom Johnson and was magnetized; by that association was drawn into local politics and had fourteen years of active campaigning there, serving four terms as city solicitor under Mayor Johnson and two terms as mayor after his chief was deposed. He declined to run for a third term, and had just resumed his law practice at the beginning of this year when he was called to Washington.

Returning to our topic, I asked him to what other qualities besides his ability as a speaker he felt indebted for what he had accomplished. He pondered that and said:

"Looking at myself impersonally, I am inclined to think I have a very patient mind. I mean by that a mind which moves slowly, which plods forward instead of dashing or leaping. There is nothing brilliant about it. A brilliant mind, it strikes me, is like a thoroughbred horse, good for a race but afterward needing to be stable for a day or two. My mind is like a plow horse. It cannot spurt, but it can go on turning furrow after furrow. That lets me get through a lot of work."

"By a patient mind," he went on, "I also mean a mind which does not leap to attitudes and decisions, but feels its way. And a mind which does not get its back up easily. Opposition does not make my mind bristle. A difference of opinion is not a personal thing with me."

"And I think," he said, his dark eyes twinkling and his wide lips quivering with fun, "it has been a very decided advantage to me to be so little and to look so young. I really mean that," he hastened to add and cited two instances in illustration. One was his argument before the Supreme court of the United States in the Cleveland traction cases, an argument which attracted the flattering favorable comment of the learned justices. The other was a speech which was one of the outstanding features of the Baltimore convention which nominated President Wilson.

"Neither of those," he commented, "could by any stretching of words be called a great speech. The natural fair-mindedness of men was what pulled me through in both cases. I looked so handicapped that my hearers said instinctively, 'Give the boy a chance!'"

Such cool, almost academic self-analysis led me to ask him how life struck him, so to speak—what ambitions it stirred in him. "I'd like to practice law," he said. "That is my one ambition. There is no office or position that I care for. But I'd like to practice and practice and practice law."

Further talk along that line developed the rather interesting fact that the new secretary of war is one of those men who seem to have been moved forward by the urgings and propulsion of their friends instead of fighting forward of their own accord in response to an inner impulse. Postmaster General Wilson all but dragged him from his lawlessness in Martinsburg to get his first taste of cabinet ways and duties and responsibilities. Martin Foran dragged him to Cleveland to become a trial lawyer. Tom Johnson dragged him into politics. And Woodrow Wilson has just dragged him to the war department.

The circumstances of the Foran case are unusual enough to partake of the romantic. In 1897, when the young and still younger looking attorney was returning from his first visit to Europe, he was table mate of the late W. T. Stead and a mild-mannered, retiring English barrister. One day Baker came on deck to find the barrister in a peck of trouble. A stalwart, lawyerish, six-foot Irishman, full of Gaelic fire, had waylaid him and was charging him, in his own person, with all the wrongs England had ever perpetrated on the distressed country. "I happened to be rather familiar with the Irish land laws," so Mr. Baker tells it, "and contrived to substitute myself for the barrister in the argument. The upshot of it was that my opponent and I became good friends and spent the rest of the voyage playing chess together. We parted in New York. I went back to Martinsburg, and no word passed between us for two years. Then the man—Martin Foran—wrote me the firm's business had so increased that another partner was required and that he wanted me. I had long felt I should be in a larger community than Martinsburg, and I liked Cleveland, but I knew they wanted a trial lawyer, which I was not. So I went on full of excuses, prepared to thank him and be dismissed in friendliness. Before I could get my first excuse out Mr. Foran had ushered me into an office and said, 'Here's yours,' and before I caught my breath he had sent some clients in for me to talk with. I stayed in Cleveland and learned to be a trial lawyer."

His enlistment as an active fighter in the Johnson camp was equally casual. "Tom" was sick one night, and the young lawyer was pressed into service to fill his place at a rally. "Tom's sick," said the man who introduced him. "This is Newton D. Baker, who's going to speak in his place."

He's a lawyer. That's all I know about him. Go ahead, boy, and tell them what you know." Baker told them, and so began the activities which led to four terms as solicitor and legal leader of the antitraction combine forces and two terms as mayor.

I asked Mr. Baker how the mayor of Cleveland's job compared with that of the secretary of war.

"I love personal relationships. One of the pleasantest things about being mayor of a city the size of Cleveland is the great number of people with whom it puts one into touch. At the war department I find a large part of my duties is taken up with seeing people. I am very glad that is so. I like to see people constantly. Of course," he explained, "I don't mean that flocks of casual visitors drop in to see me here. But the business of the department brings many people to me daily."

I had meant to ask him how the two positions compared in size and difficulty. He was non-committal on that point, and I suggested that at least he did not seem appalled by the size of his new task, even though the Mexican situation had given him a baptism of fire for a greeting. He said:

"I am not appalled. No man can hope to escape mistakes. Mistakes are inevitable. I know I shall make some. But the only things one need be really afraid of are insincerities and indirectness. Also, it is well to remember that unfamiliar tasks have a way of looking mountainous. Familiarity reduces their proportions. At present I am working here from half past eight in the morning till midnight to become familiar with mine. That slow mind of mine," he said smilingly, "compels me to put in those long hours."

"What is your idea of the functions of the secretary of war?"

"The duties," he said, "are largely legal. Almost all the secretaries have been lawyers. (He cited the names of many, from Stanton down to his predecessor, Garrison.) Strictly military affairs are not my province. Experts must care for those things. Legal questions—touching the conflicting rights of state and federal governments, the navigability of streams, the proceedings of courts martial—such things comprise the problems I have to settle. I am an executive. Congress has made laws governing my department. It is my duty to see that they are carried out conscientiously."

About "preparedness" he felt obliged to decline to say a word, and I reminded him of an interview in which he was recently quoted as saying that he was "for peace at almost any price."

"So I am," he answered stoutly, "because peace seems to me the reasonable thing. I do not say that war is always avoidable. It seems to come sometimes as earthquakes come—a natural cataclysm. The French revolution, I think, was such a war. But war is always regrettable. Peace is what spells progress. We have to advance step by step. I do not think we can hope to force advancement by violence. And I believe that sometimes we shall have a court of nations, and no more wars. Was it Lowell said: 'The telegraph gave the world a nervous system?' As our world gets better co-ordinated by intercommunication, we shall have fewer of the misunderstandings which cause wars."

Constantly, as we talked, alike in his domicile and in his office, the new secretary's unpretentious pipe was in his mouth. Constantly his knees crooked and his feet curled up to comfortable positions on radiator top and desk top. Though there was always dignity about him, we might have been two undergraduates chatting together. His attitude was not suggestive of lounging or of affected carelessness. It was, I thought, the bodily ease which is apt to reflect outwardly the mental states of self-unconsciousness and serene self-confidence. As city solicitor of Cleveland, in the traction matters, he fought the mobilized legal big guns of Ohio to a standstill. As mayor he forced the people to retain him until he had done what he set out to do.

To be secretary of war just now, to be lifted at one step from local into national prominence at a critical moment like the present, is a far more searching test of his capacities than any he has yet undergone.

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