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9 March 1916, Part I: Newton Baker Sworn In as Secretary of War

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Now all roads lead to France and heavy is the tread
Of the living; but the dead returning lightly dance.

Edward Thomas, Roads
not to have wanted to go to Washington at all; while mayor he had twice turned down President-elect Wilson’s offer of the post of secretary of the interior. Baker was in Cleveland that first week of March 1916 when President Wilson wired offering the position. Baker was hesitant and skeptical, but eventually accepted. After that it all happened quickly. On Wednesday 8 March Baker left Cleveland on a train bound for Washington, where the following day he was sworn in as Secretary of War. Baker was 44 years old and the youngest member of the Wilson Cabinet.

There were no guarantees when he arrived in Washington; had Wilson lost the presidential race that November, Baker would have been out of a job in less than a year. The prospect of one year and out may be why he took the job. Instead he stayed the next five years, through the end of Wilson’s second term. Wilson proved wise in his selection of Baker. Generous and conciliatory by nature, the new secretary of war was a witty and charming man who managed to walk a fine line between the presidential, Congressional, and military leadership.

That June came the fight over the National Defense Act of 1916, followed by Wilson’s re-election campaign. The Germans began unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917 and created a diplomatic crisis that same winter with the Zimmerman Telegram. The U.S. military that Baker had taken over was essentially a constabulary force of some 200,000 ill-equipped men. When war finally came there was the draft to deal with, commanders to choose, and sensitive military and diplomatic issues to be worked out with the Allies. Secretary of War Baker also had to contend with a number of ugly, racially charged incidents involving African American soldiers and hostile civilians living adjacent to stateside military bases.

By the Great War’s end, Newton Baker presided over an American Expeditionary Force numbering in the millions. When he was being sworn in on 9 March 1916, all of that was in the future. Right now the new secretary of war had a more immediate problem: Pancho Villa and his force of 500 men attacked Columbus, New Mexico, that very day. Tomorrow in 9 March 1916, Part II we will discuss Villa’s raid.

Our contributor, Keith Muchowski, is an outstanding blogger, who looks at American history from a New Yorker’s viewpoint. Visit Keith’s Blog, The Strawfoot, for more interesting insights on the