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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*

Wednesday, March 9, 2016

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

By Keith Muchowski

A few weeks back we wrote about the resignation of Woodrow Wilson's secretary of war Lindley M. Garrison. Today marks the 100th anniversary of the swearing-in of his replacement: Newton D. Baker.



Baker and His Son in 1913

On the surface Newton Baker's appointment seemed like a stretch. Up to that point he had had little experience in national or military affairs. Moreover, with his spectacles, pipe, thin frame, and bookish manner the Midwestern lawyer hardly exuded a military bearing. When Baker finally did come to the attention of Washington and the general public in the winter of 1916, many believed him to be a staunch pacifist. His purported pacifism fit in well with President Wilson's strategy going into the 1916 presidential race. Outgoing Secretary Garrison's Continental Army Plan proved unpopular with many in Washington and the public at large. Even worse, Garrison himself had become increasingly associated with Preparedness advocates. Wilson's upcoming campaign was predicated on the notion that he had "kept us out of war." In this context putting Baker in the War Department was a logical choice.

Newton Diehl Baker had been the private secretary to the postmaster general in the second Grover Cleveland Administration. He went on from there to become the City Solicitor (1903–11) and Mayor (1912–15) of Cleveland, Ohio. Baker was a progressive reformer and in this capacity modernized the municipality via such means as road paving, sewer treatment, public transportation, improvements to the potable water supply, and management of the Great Lakes shoreline. These were mundane but important measures at a time when many Americans still lived in crowded, unsanitary conditions with no electricity or running water.

Baker initially did not want to accept Wilson's offer to run the War Department. Indeed he seems

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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.



Secretary of War Newton D. Baker Inspects a Training Camp at American University in 1917

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



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historians, enthusiasts, and collectors to contribute to *Roads*.

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5 comments:

 **Elmer Stoup** March 9, 2016 at 10:29 AM
Great article, but it's the American Expeditionary Forces.
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 **Rex Passion** March 9, 2016 at 10:57 AM
Good to see your work on Roads.
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Anonymous March 9, 2016 at 7:11 PM
Thanks, Rex. I hope you have been well.

Keith

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Grove March 9, 2016 at 12:49 PM
To anyone interested in this topic, I would suggest reading Frederick Palmer's "Newton D. Baker - America at War".
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 **CJ** March 9, 2016 at 7:03 PM
IMHO - Newton Baker is one of the more underrated figures in our war effort.
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