

# A Hand Over the Waters

## Josephus Daniels

By Lee A. Craig

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BY ROBERT K. LANDERS

**A CENTURY AGO**, at the dawn of Woodrow Wilson's presidency, young Franklin Roosevelt went to work for Josephus Daniels, the secretary of the Navy. Roosevelt, the new assistant secretary, was less than awe-struck at the sight of his boss: The paunchy Southern gentleman—wearing, as always, a broad-brimmed hat, a three-piece suit, a string tie and a courtly smile—was, he said later, “the funniest looking hillbilly I had ever seen.” The Navy brass were less amused and, indeed, were appalled by this landlubber

The Southern segregationist, landlubber and ‘near-pacifist’ who helped transform America’s Navy.

and political hack from North Carolina who had no love of the sea and ships, who was indifferent to Navy protocol, and, worse, who was determined to change the service drastically. Even so, they thought they could handle him.

The Navy then was badly in need of reform, as Lee A. Craig observes in his excellent biography, “Josephus Daniels: His Life and Times.” “Its socially hide-bound officer corps, byzantine organizational structure, and arcane customs,” he writes, “resembled something from a Gilbert and Sullivan opera.” The decentralized command structure, functional in the age of sail, was “dangerously antiquated.”

Daniels (1862-1948), a Southern progressive who fervently believed in education, pushed the Navy to serve as a school for enlisted men, helping them to advance in life. A self-made businessman and publisher (of Raleigh’s influential News and Observer), Daniels had long resented having been looked down on by North Carolina’s

“Bourbon” planters. As head of the Department of the Navy, he refused to respect the social barrier between officers and the servicemen they led. He succeeded in opening the Naval Academy to enlisted men and even got the Navy and the Marine Corps to admit women for the first time.

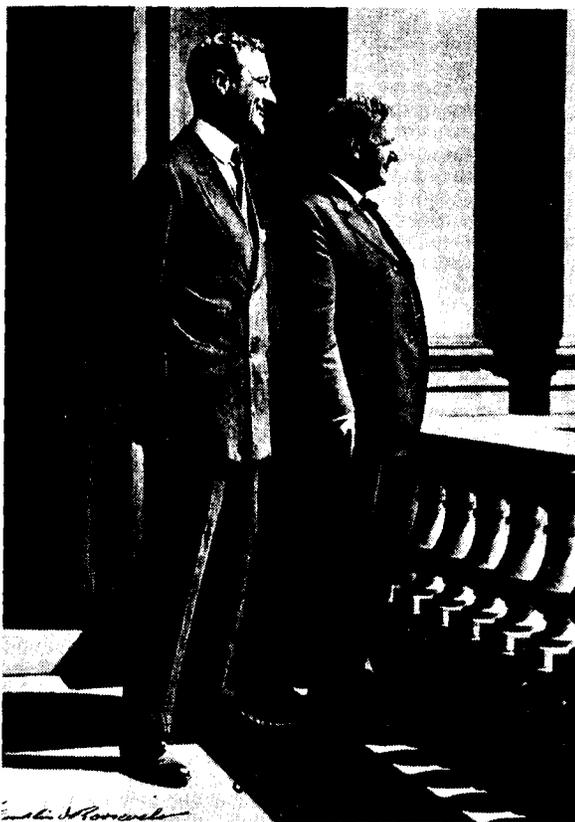
A devout Methodist, devoted family man and Prohibitionist, Daniels increased the number of chaplains in the Navy. He tried (with more difficulty) to reduce the number of prostitutes around naval bases and ordered alcohol banned from naval vessels, yards and stations. The offered substitute—a cup of coffee—“became disparagingly known as ‘a cup of Josephus Daniels,’ and as legend has it,” Mr. Craig writes, “this was soon shortened to a ‘cup of Joe.’”

Daniels had served in Grover Cleveland’s second administration, overseeing all nonmilitary hiring, and had many years of experience in Democratic politics. He was a skilled political infighter, as the admirals and others who underestimated the secretary came to find out. While his opponents napped, Daniels would be “showing an obscure report on naval affairs to a congressman or whispering the right words in [President] Wilson’s ear—and then at the right moment he would spring.” Watching this happen again and again, Roosevelt learned a lot from Daniels about how politics was played in Washington—and when he became president himself, he appointed Daniels ambassador to Mexico.

Mr. Craig, an economist and historian at North Carolina State University, brings a keen analytical intelligence to bear at each stage of Daniels’s eventful life. The reader learns a good deal about the forces at work in North Carolina after the Civil War, in the newspaper business and politics of the period, and in naval warfare before and

after U.S. entry into World War I. Mr. Craig’s judgments are fair, and his prose is clear, vigorous and free of jargon (though not of a certain repetitiousness).

Daniels was among Wilson’s closest confidants, according to Mr. Craig, but the influence of this “near-pacifist” and “anti-imperialist” waned when it came to deciding whether to go to war. At first, Mr. Craig writes, Daniels “was



Courtesy of Frank Daniels Jr.

**FRIENDS** Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Josephus Daniels.

optimistic that Wilson would not perpetuate the gunboat diplomacy of his predecessors. In this he would be disappointed.” The Latin American campaigns that Secretary Daniels oversaw included Nicaragua, Mexico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Cuba.

After World War I began, Daniels became a proponent of a strong Navy (instead of merely an “adequate” one), but he fully supported Wilson’s proclamation of neutrality. When the pro-British tilt of neutrality became evident, Daniels was privately almost as

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BOOKS

'Army: A body of men assembled to rectify the mistakes of the diplomats.' —Josephus Daniels

distressed as William Jennings Bryan, the secretary of state, who broke with Wilson and resigned. Daniels stayed on. A devout Democrat, he calculated that, as Mr. Craig puts it, his party "needed Wilson more than it needed Bryan, and Daniels would risk war to avoid a schism in the party."

Wilson did take Daniels's advice to avoid going to war before he faced the voters in 1916, lest they turn against him. But Wilson did not view his election victory as a mandate for neutrality, as Daniels did. Even so, when "the Day of Decision" arrived on March 20, 1917, Daniels voted with the rest of Wilson's cabinet for war. "The president guessed correctly," Mr. Craig says, "that Daniels was too much of a party man to cause an ugly public rift." Despite his antiwar sentiments and the overblown charges later that he had failed to prepare the Navy for the war, the Navy secretary proved an effective wartime leader—and he offered sound, if unheeded, advice to Wilson on the making, and selling, of the peace.

For all Daniels's virtues and accomplishments, it is impossible to overlook the racism and demagoguery that he displayed in North Carolina. In 1898, to wrest control of the state back from the Fusionists—white and black Republicans allied with poor white Populists—Daniels, with the News and Observer as his voice, led a "White Supremacy Campaign" to vilify blacks, draw the Populists back to the Democratic fold and end "black rule." For Daniels and other Southern progressives, progress was possible only if blacks were kept down. "More than any other individual," Mr. Craig writes, Daniels "was responsible for the disenfranchisement of the state's African American citizens." He remained proud of that dubious achievement to the day he died.

*Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell."*