

Baker not one to shrink from gulf challenge

By JOHN CRAVOIS

POST WASHINGTON BUREAU

FRIDAY DEC 7 1990

WASHINGTON — In the upcoming diplomatic battle of Baghdad, smooth-talking Texan James Baker is the man America and its allies will count on to stare down Saddam Hussein.

Baker — a 60-year-old lawyer from Houston who didn't plunge into politics until he was 40 — speaks softly but carries a Texas-sized stick, according to people close to the secretary of state.

Plans are being made for Baker to travel to Baghdad before Jan. 15 to meet with the Iraqi

president in hopes of reaching a peaceful resolution to the Persian Gulf crisis.

Likewise, Iraq is expected to send an envoy to Washington to meet with President Bush.

"You don't want to cross James Baker," said Houstonian Preston Moore, a cousin of Baker's and president of Wilson Industries.

"Obviously, he's a nice person, but I've been on the other side of business situations from him, and I don't like it . . . He's tough — he's even physically tough. He's an aggressive competitor."

Without question, trying to force Iraq out of Kuwait without a war in the volatile Middle East is the challenge of a lifetime for Baker, Moore said.

"I don't know how anybody can have a bigger challenge."

But Americans can rest assured Baker has the talent, training and temperament for dealing with Saddam, Moore maintained.

"He's a marvelous leader and a strong, bright person. I think Saddam will find him to be a very strong advocate for this country and

Please see **BAKER, A-17**

BAKER: Secretary of state not one to shrink from a challenge

From A-1

the entire United Nations," he said. George Strake, former Texas Republican Party chairman and the chief organizer of this year's Economic Summit in Houston, agreed, saying, "If I had to put my life on the line, I'd like Jim Baker to handle the negotiations."

"There's nobody better for the job," Strake added.

Other longtime GOP activists who worked with Baker politically over the past 20 years expressed similar sentiments.

"I think anybody who knows Jim knows that he is an extremely tough person. His soft-spokenness I guess is from breeding. He's just not a screaming person," said veteran organizer Nancy Palm, who once was a neighbor of Baker's.

She said evidence of Baker's ability to handle a seemingly impossible task was his appearance this week before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, during which he calmly but firmly held the administration's ground despite harsh criticism from several senators.

"I was very much impressed with the man's brilliance in dealing with that, and I've never used the word brilliant before in describing Jim," Palm said.

One administration official

"These abilities that he has weren't developed in Washington. His leadership is innate."

— Preston Moore, Baker's cousin

quipped that staying home to deal with Congress this week may not have been any easier for Baker than circling the globe trying to keep U.S. allies together, but it at least gave the secretary a break from his grueling travel schedule.

In November alone, State Department officials estimate Baker traveled more than 37,000 miles to 11 different nations and throughout the United States.

Fred Gray of Pasadena, also a longtime political pal, confessed he was concerned Baker may be too "moderate" to be able to deal toughly with the likes of Saddam.

"I never pictured him being in such a powerful role before. I've been a little surprised — and pleasantly so — at his strong language and posture through all this," Gray said.

But not all Texans are tripping over themselves to pat Baker on the back for his handling of the gulf crisis.

Billionaire businessman Ross Perot of Dallas declared in a National Press Club speech Thursday that "Jim Baker has missed the lesson of Vietnam."

Perot described Baker as "a good man, a smart man (and) a hard-working man," but he criticized the secretary for repeatedly suggesting the lesson America must learn from Vietnam is that overpowering force must be used

to ensure victory.

"That's the little piece of the lesson," Perot declared. "The big piece of the lesson is first commit the nation and then commit the troops."

Baker has taken a number of other lumps for his handling of the gulf crisis.

He received widespread criticism when it was revealed that U.S. officials had indications Iraq might invade Kuwait but did nothing in response.

More recently, when he visited U.S. troops deployed in Saudi Arabia last month, Baker was openly confronted by some soldiers who insisted they should either fight immediately or go home.

Despite the stress and strain of trying to keep the U.S. out of war, Baker remarkably has remained a true Texan who rarely passes on a chance to talk about football, fishing and other sports or to pass on a good joke, Moore said.

"He hasn't changed. I call him up and the he says right away, 'Let me tell you a joke,'" he said.

Moore and Baker went to Kin-kaid Elementary School in Houston along with another well-known native son — outgoing Lt. Gov. Bill Hobby. Baker would go on to earn a B.A. degree from Princeton and a law degree from the University of Texas, spending two years in the U.S. Marine Corps in between schools.

"These abilities that he has weren't developed in Washington. His leadership is innate. He was a leader back in school and throughout his life," Moore said.

Regardless, Baker followed his grandfather's advice to stay out of politics until 1970 when, shortly after his first wife died, he was recruited by Bush to run his Harris County operations in a U.S. Senate race against Lloyd Bentsen. Baker, whose grandfather founded the Baker & Botts law firm, had been a Democrat until he got active in politics.

Bentsen won the race, but — thanks to Baker — Bush overwhelmingly carried Harris County.

"We got 61 percent in Houston. It was a much bigger margin than anybody thought we would get," Baker once said.

He first gained a national reputation as a skilled political tactician when he became Gerald Ford's chief delegate hunter at the 1976 GOP convention, where Baker's walkie-talkie handle was "Miracle Man."

Two years later, he made his only bid for elected office — an unsuccessful race against Democrat Mark White for Texas attorney general.

In 1980, Baker headed Bush's unsuccessful bid against Ronald Reagan for the Republican presidential nomination, but was tapped by Reagan to be White House chief of staff. He held that job until switching places with Donald Reagan to become treasury secretary in 1985.

He led Bush's winning presidential bid in 1988 and then was named secretary of state.

Baker often is rumored as future presidential material, but some associates maintain his current post is "the only job he ever wanted."