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Every election cycle, illustrations of donkeys and elephants show up in political cartoons, campaign buttons, Internet memes, and some truly alarming fashion choices. How could it be otherwise? The two beasts -- the former representing the Democratic Party; the latter, the Republican Party -- are mainstays of America's visual culture, as recognizable as Santa Claus or Uncle Sam.

Yet most Americans would be surprised to learn that both political symbols (as well as Santa Claus and Uncle Sam) were popularized, and given their modern forms, by the same maverick cartoonist. His name was Thomas Nast, and over the course of his tenure at Harper's Weekly, from 1862 to 1886, he became America's first great political cartoonist -- and one of its harshest satirists. In the intricately detailed wood engravings for which he's best remembered, he tackled the Civil War, the follies of Reconstruction, immigration, and -- most famously -- the Tammany Hall political machine. Some have suggested that the word "nasty" derives from the artist's surname, and while this is almost certainly not true, one glance at his cartoons might convince you that it is.

"Third Term Panic," is the 1874 cartoon often credited with popularizing the elephant as a symbol for the Republican Party. In the months leading up to the midterms, the New York Herald, at the time backing several Democratic candidates, had spread the rumor that President Ulysses Grant, a Republican, was contemplating running for a third term in 1876 -- not illegal in the days before the 22nd Amendment but definitely frowned upon. Nast, a proud supporter of the Party of Lincoln, drew the Herald as a donkey wrapped in a lion's skin, frightening the other animals with wild stories of a Grant dictatorship. Among these animals is an enormous, oafish elephant labeled "the Republican Vote," which looks as though it's about to tumble off a cliff.

Nast's insight was to present American politics as one big, messy menagerie -- a circus, much like the one Barnum & Bailey had debuted in New York three years earlier. Like the best satirists, he ridiculed his own side almost as gleefully as he did his opponents' -- and so, he reimagined the GOP as a weak, panicky creature that was constantly lumbering off in the wrong direction, its size more of a liability than an asset. Nast's donkeys fare no better; a typical cartoon from 1879 shows the stubborn beast dangling by the tail, about to fall into an abyss of "financial chaos."

More often than not, in fact, his cartoons depict elephants and donkeys only a hair's breadth away from chaos -- a pretty fair assessment of Republican and Democratic leadership during the Gilded Age.

