



When Donkey and Elephant First Clashed

By Jennifer J. Rodibaugh

ONE HUNDRED FORTY YEARS ago, *Harper's Weekly's* cartoonist of genius, Thomas Nast, sired the Democratic donkey and Republican elephant into ridicule. In an environment of flourishing editorial cartoons, Nast's ready vocabulary of political symbols caught on. Within a decade the donkey and elephant had evolved from the focal points of partisan mockery into the popular mascots they are today.

Nast's donkey (or "jackass" as it was known then) first appeared in *Harper's Weekly* on January 15, 1870, kicking a dead lion. Published barely a month after the sudden death of Lincoln's former Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, the cartoon was a scathing invective against the Democratic, "Copperhead" press (named for its snakeish insidiousness), which was abusing Stanton's memory. Nast's cartoon, entitled, "A live jackass kicking a dead lion," suggested the reverse of the old proverb, "A live ass is better than a dead lion."

The Republican elephant debuted on November 7, 1874—three days after the Democrats gained a majority in the House of Representatives for the first time after the Civil War. A staunch Republican, Nast derided his fellows, depicting them as the panicked elephant stampeding towards a pit in its flight from a jackass dressed in a lionskin. The implication was that the *New York Herald* (the jackass) had flustered Republican voters with its allegation that President Ulysses S. Grant was a modern Caesar, scheming for a third term.

Nast was not the first to use either the Democratic jackass or the Republican elephant—the former had appeared as a popular symbol during Andrew Jackson's 1828 campaign; the latter on a few campaign posters, but probably never to Nast's knowledge. Earlier representations lacked a regular, national readership to



recognize recurring symbols. Neither had they evinced Nast's celebrated artistry or editorial bite.

Citing Nast's meticulous front-line Civil War illustrations, President Abraham Lincoln called him "our best recruiting sergeant," whose work, "never failed to arouse enthusiasm and patriotism." Grant also paid tribute to Nast following his 1868 presidential victory, saying, "Two things elected me: The sword of Sheridan and the pencil of Thomast Nast." But Nast's editorial prowess was most famously displayed during his ferocious 1870–1871 pictorial bombardment of New York spoilsman, Boss Tweed, which so captured the pub-

lic interest that circulation of *Harper's Weekly* trebled that year.

Nast reused the Democratic donkey and the Republican elephant until they seeped into the nation's consciousness. By the 1880s, rivals—such as Joseph Keppler of the popular humor magazine *Puck*—had adopted Nast's symbols to ensure that their readership would recognize the subject of their cartoons. Today, the elephant is the official symbol of the Republican Party, and the donkey is widely accepted by Democrats. Nast's potent shorthand for America's leading political parties has outlasted its original context, freeing the donkey and elephant to duel for another generation. 🐘

