Uncle Sam

The figure of Uncle Sam is an American symbol as widely recognized as the American flag. He has symbolized the United States since the War of 1812. One legend has it that during that war, a storeyard in Troy, New York, stamped the initials "U.S." on barrels of salted meat for American soldiers. The "U.S." stood for United States. Workers, though, jokingly claimed that the initials really stood for "Uncle Sam" (Samuel Wilson), who managed the storeyard. The idea of equating Uncle Sam with the United States spread rapidly. After all, Great Britain, the nation's opponent in the War of 1812, already had a personal symbol of its own—the figure of an English farmer, John Bull.

Uncle Sam as we know him today was first drawn in the 1860s by the American cartoonist Thomas Nast. The symbol of Uncle Sam usually has long hair and a white beard. His pants have red and white stripes, his stovepipe hat is decorated with stars and stripes, and he wears a cutaway coat.

The Donkey and the Elephant

Two well-known symbols—the donkey and the elephant—represent the major political parties in the United States. They were first drawn as symbols of the Democratic party and the Republican party by American cartoonist Thomas Nast. The donkey was used for the first time as a political symbol by Andrew Jackson after his opponents in the 1828 presidential election called him a "jackass." Later, Nast used the donkey in his cartoons to stand for the Democratic party. The donkey soon became recognized as the symbol of the Democratic party.

The elephant as a symbol of the Republican party first appeared in a cartoon by Nast in Harper's Weekly in 1874. He used the elephant to represent the Republican vote. It soon came to stand for the Republican party.