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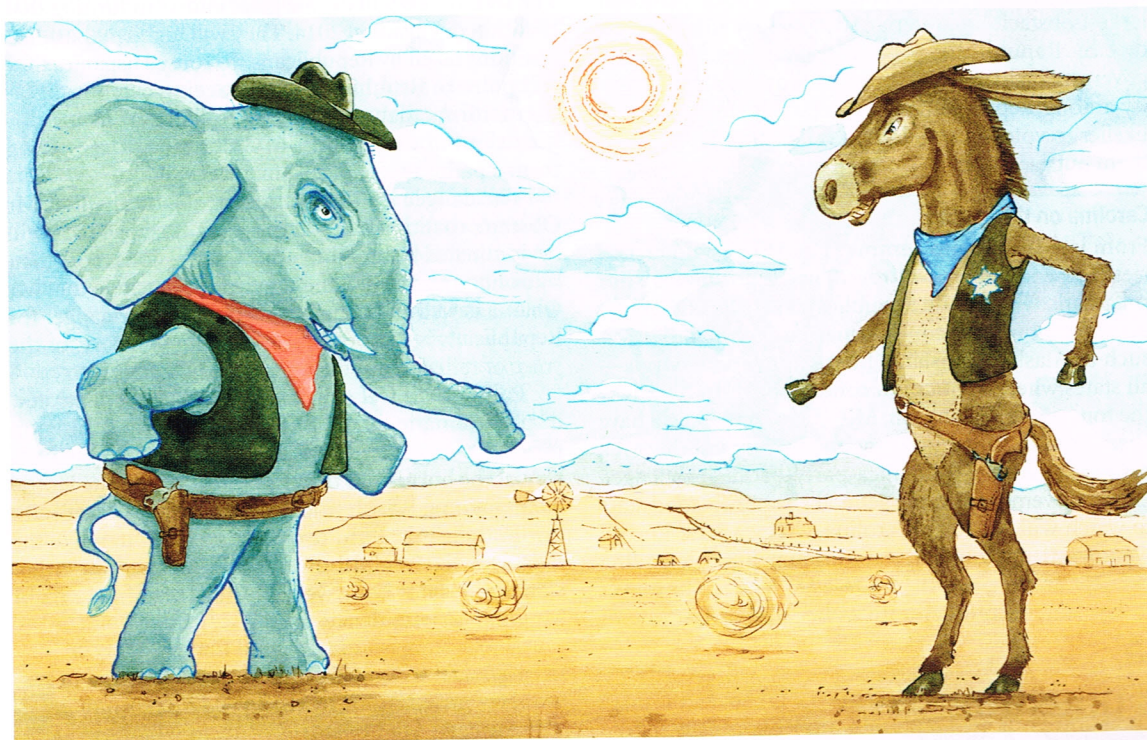
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United States



Mid-term showdown

David Rennie WASHINGTON, DC

A story of high stakes and low politics

The law says that Barack Obama will wield his presidential powers until January 20th 2017, the day that his successor will be inaugurated and he will clatter away into the winter sky aboard a Marine Corps helicopter. His Republican opponents hope that 2014 will be the year in which they in effect end his second term.

Conservatives hope that anaemic presidential approval ratings, a mediocre economic recovery, voter distrust of "Obamacare" health reforms and a Republican-friendly electoral map will combine to hand them gains in the mid-term congressional elections of November 2014. Their aim is to hold the House of Representatives and capture the Senate, giving them control of both halves of Congress for the first time since 2006. If they succeed, from that moment on Mr Obama will find it hard to make headway with his remaining domestic policies, from reforming the immigration system to tackling climate change, or restoring financing for education and infrastructure.

Republicans have reasons to be confident about holding the House of Representatives. First, the party that controls the White House usually loses seats in mid-term contests. Second, mid-term contests are low-turnout affairs, attracting an electorate that is whiter, older

and more conservative than the country at large. Finally, a conservative wave that swept the country in 2010 put Republicans in a position to dominate a once-in-a-decade redrawing of congressional districts, leaving their party with a large stock of impregnable safe House seats.

To take the Senate from the Democrats, the Republicans will need to pull off a net swing of at least six seats. That goal is ambitious but not beyond their grasp. The half-dozen most competitive Senate races in 2014 will be in states that voted to send the Republican Mitt

Confidence is not always the Republicans' friend

Romney to the White House in 2012. Some Democratic-held seats look doomed, for instance in West Virginia, a gritty coal-mining state where Mr Obama is widely disliked.

Yet confidence is not always the Republicans' friend. The party inflicted a grave blow to its own standing in the autumn of 2013, voting to shut down the federal government and threatening to trigger a default on America's public debts in a doomed attempt to destroy Obamacare. The confrontation served up an object lesson in how those ultra-safe House seats have created a core of a few dozen members with little interest in national opinion, as their survival in office depends not on the general electorate but on the party activists

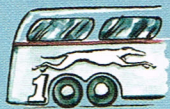
2014 IN BRIEF

New York opens One World Trade Centre, 13 years after the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001

David Rennie: Washington bureau chief and Lexington columnist, *The Economist*

2014 IN BRIEF

The Greyhound Bus Company celebrates 100 years on the road



▶ who vote in candidate-selection primaries.

In recent elections the party has thrown away promising Senate seats by selecting candidates who thrilled party activists but startled the general public with extreme or ill-informed views on everything from abortion to *sharia* law. In 2014, once again, the largest obstacles to a Republican victory may be traps dug by Republicans. Militantly anti-establishment, government-loathing tea-party followers are a minority among Republican supporters. But they are much likelier to vote in candidate-selection primaries, giving them outside clout.

Carolina on their mind

From late spring into summer a series of state primaries for Senate seats will reveal whether the purist or pragmatic wing of the Republican Party has the upper hand. Rumbustious contests may be expected in places such as Alaska, Louisiana, Mississippi and Georgia—all states where politics is a contact sport. In Kentucky the top Senate Republican, Mitch McConnell, will have spent months, and much time and money, fighting off a primary challenge from a tea-party-backed challenger. Come November and the general election, a good state to watch will be North Carolina, where a little-known Democratic incumbent, Kay Hagan, will be defending her seat and—given the knife-edge balance of power in her state—could end up as her party's last line of

defence in the battle for the Senate.

North Carolina is an example of the sort of battleground state that Mr Obama twice put in play (and won once, in 2008) by firing up a coalition including young voters, blacks, college-educated women and Hispanics. The Democrats will devote great efforts to turning that coalition out again in 2014. They will highlight hardline positions taken by Republicans. To rouse Hispanics they will point to Republican foot-dragging over immigration reforms that would bring millions of illegal migrants out of the shadows of American society, giving them a pathway to citizenship.

The danger for the Democrats is not just that Mr Obama's coalition will stay at home. It is that 2014 will be dominated by broad-brushed impressions more than by policy arguments, as many voters conclude that Mr Obama is well-meaning but ineffective. The danger for Republicans is that voters come to see their party as the voice of reflexive opposition and shrill extremism.

Politics will feel sour and small in 2014, with few displays of national unity (though official Washington may be briefly stirred, in August, by the 200th anniversary of the burning of the Capitol and the White House by marauding British troops). Both the parties will aim low in their mid-term campaigns, trying to make the contest a referendum on the awfulness of the other side. It does not bode well for the remaining years of Mr Obama's presidency. ■

The China question

Jonathan Freedland

What will life be like when China is top dog?

In 2014 America will be only a few years away from a world that foreign-policy experts have long been predicting: one in which China overtakes it to become the biggest economy, and eventually the mightiest power, on the planet. The longer China surges (albeit no longer at double-digit rates) while a gridlocked Washington cannot solve its own problems, let alone anyone else's, the more

The model is Lenovo's takeover of IBM's personal-computing division

Americans and others will contemplate a mind-concentrating question: what will life be like when China is top dog?

Few believe that Chinese dominance will be identical to America's global supremacy of the past half-century. Tea and dim sum will not replace Coke and the Big Mac overnight. Likelier is that the familiar Western brands will remain but under Chinese ownership. The model is

Lenovo's takeover of IBM's personal-computing division or Geely's acquisition of Volvo of Sweden.

The cultural impact will be less obvious than in the days of Coca-Cola imperialism, but just as real. Witness the Chinese purchase of AMC, an entertainment giant: Beijing may not be able to make films that the world wants to see, but it will decide which ones get produced and own the cinemas where they are shown.

China's soft power will make itself felt in every aspect of Western lives. Business may slow during late January, thanks to the Chinese new year. The seasonal habit of hanging lanterns from the trees may cross the Pacific, the way Hallowe'en masks travelled back to Europe across the Atlantic. The Olympic games and football World Cup will have to adjust their timetables to accommodate the world's largest television audience.

The classiest hotels will have signs in English and Mandarin, welcoming the new rich. Western politicians will all but beg for Chinese investment. And American Lord Granthams, eminent men with-



out money, will marry Chinese Coras, women without lineage but with plenty of spare cash.

American and European elites will pride themselves on knowing the names of the rising stars of Chinese politics, the way they used to know the early field for Iowa and New Hampshire. They will follow China for the same reason Willie Sutton said he robbed banks: "Because that's where the money is." ■

Jonathan Freedland: columnist, the *Guardian*, and author of "American Winter", a novel to be published under the pseudonym Sam Bourne in 2014 (HarperCollins)