

Why Donald Trump doesn't get the benefit of the doubt on his 'blood' comment

By [Janell Ross](#) August 10

In the early 1900s, as the women's suffrage movement picked up steam, a political cartoon ran in the [Milwaukee Free Press](#) and then a national anti-suffrage magazine because it captured the essence of the national debate. It featured a woman juggling four objects: a frying pan, a broom, a baby and a ballot. And it included a single question: "Can she do it?"

That question -- can women be trusted to juggle the things that are culturally prescribed as theirs, along with those things that are generally done by men and (the argument goes) require significant mental capacity along with limited emotion? -- has long been used to justify women's subjugation and exclusion from public life.

And if we needed any confirmation that the question persists, enter Donald Trump, the Republican presidential candidate and current front-runner for his party's nomination.

In the days since the first GOP presidential-primary debate, Trump has openly and sometimes more cryptically questioned the competence, qualifications and temperament of one of the three Fox News debate moderators, Megyn Kelly. That line of attack seemed to reach its apex, or perhaps its nadir, on Friday, when Trump described Kelly as a "a lightweight" who is "trying to be tough, trying to be sharp." Trump capped that barb by saying, "You could see that there was blood coming out her eyes, blood coming out of her [brief pause] wherever."

The comment has widely been reported and understood as Trump suggesting Kelly was having her period -- something Trump emphatically denies.

It is of course possible that's not what Trump meant; he says he meant blood was coming out of her nose. But it's also highly possible that Trump is just another dude, in a long line of dudes, who suspect or earnestly believe that women's capacity for decision-making-- even their fitness for participation in public life -- is in some way challenged or diminished by those darn monthly periods. He would hardly be the first.

Part of the reason Trump isn't being given the benefit of the doubt here is that he is Trump. The real-estate tycoon has a long and at least partially documented history of what The Washington Post just this weekend called "[flippant misogyny](#)." Then there's his history of myth-weaving around cultural touchstones and controversies. His [sentiments on immigration](#) are really only the latest in a long, long line.

And beyond Trump, women's menstrual cycles and supposed mental fluctuations rank high on an astonishingly durable list of cultural myths and stereotypes that have also conveniently served to limit women's power, challenge their eligibility and justify their exclusion. When it comes to periods, this is how the logic goes: Women are volatile, sometimes irrational, and therefore unfit for certain roles.

And here's what those myths -- and that myth-based reasoning -- breeds.

In early 20th-century America, when it would have been completely unseemly to allude directly to the way women's bodies function, you get that political cartoon. And near the end of the 20th century, in 1984, you get questions about Geraldine Ferraro and her willingness or ability to engage in nuclear war on "Meet the Press." (Ferraro was, of course, the first woman to become the vice-presidential nominee for a major party.)

Hillary Clinton's 2008 campaign seemed so preoccupied with this question that despite national fatigue with all things war-related, she mounted a remarkably hawkish campaign. Remember the 3 a.m. phone call?



Think about that for a moment. Women's mettle, women's stability, women's capacity for sustained, serious thought and important decision-making has come up over and over again. It came up when then-Rep. Michele Bachman (R-Minn.) was running for president, in the form of questions about her [possibly hormone-induced migraines](#). It also came up when Sarah Palin was a vice-presidential candidate with a child under the age of 1.

The questions about the science and impact of of migraine headaches and the conversation about the demands of caring for a young and special-needs child in too many cases ultimately boil down to one thing, according to Kelly Ditmar, a Rutgers University political scientist and scholar at the school's Center for American Women and Politics.

Can a woman even do this job?

So when Ditmar heard Trump's blood-related comments and his subsequent explanation, she, too, immediately thought, "That's a dig about women and their periods." Trump's comments come out of and are very much connected to a political history -- distant past and the almost-present. And how Americans -- including other political candidates, voters and political reporters and commentators -- respond is worth noting, she said.

It's much harder to congratulate ourselves for having two women -- one in each party -- competing to be our next president when this kind of innuendo is still around. One of those two women, GOP presidential contender Carly Fiorina, just offered a clear reminder in more than one way. On Sunday, during an interview on CNN, Jake Tapper asked Fiorina if she was offended by Trump's comments about Kelly.

Here's the exchange that followed:

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FIORINA: They were completely inappropriate and offensive comments, period.

TAPPER: Do you think that Trump's comments were sexist? Do you think he was specifically referring -- I can't believe I'm even saying this -- to Megyn Kelly having her period?

FIORINA: Look, I started out as a secretary and as I made my way up in the business world, a male-dominated business world, I've had lots of men imply that I was unfit for decision making because maybe I was having my period. So I'll say it, OK...

TAPPER: I did say it.

FIORINA: ...When I started this campaign I was asked on a national television show whether a woman's hormones prevented her from serving in the Oval Office. My response was, can we think of a single instance in which a man's hormones might have clouded his judgement.

TAPPER: I can.

FIORINA: Yeah, me too...The point is women understood that comment. And yes, it is offensive.

Fiorina hasn't just been on the receiving end of, "Oh, you must be having your period" comments. She knows firsthand how they can be, and have been, used to diminish and dismiss women in positions of authority and influence.

And, of course, that's why it wasn't hard for Fiorina and many other women to believe that Trump's intentions weren't so benign.

Janell Ross is a reporter for The Fix who writes about race, gender, immigration and inequality.

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