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Redux: Gender, Stamina, and Politics

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Last September Hillary Clinton left a memorial observance for 9/11 in New York City and stumbled as she approached her car. She had pneumonia and spent the next few days recuperating. Not long after, Donald Trump responded publicly with a mocking, tawdry response to her stumble. “She’s supposed to fight all these different things,” he said. “And she can’t even make it fifteen feet to her car. Give me a break. Give me a break.” After Trump enacted a fake stagger away from the podium, he finished his insulting display to the cheers of the crowd with, “We need stamina! We need energy!”^[1]

These events stimulated a speech I delivered shortly before the November election, along with a blog entitled “Gender, Stamina, and Politics.” The blog, with a link to the talk, is available on this site [here](#). They explore the post-Civil War history of widely believed “scientific” claims that people have a finite amount of energy, that elimination of bodily fluids is particularly sapping to bodily integrity, that due to the demands and periodicity of their reproductive systems women are less capable of sustained work than men, that they are more likely to be episodically emotional and unstable, and that, in sum, they are less qualified than men for strenuous physical and mental undertakings. Such “scientific” views were brought to prominence by Harvard Medical School Professor Dr. Edward H. Clarke in the 1870s. Despite convincing evidence that such stereotypes are invalid and inappropriate bases for discriminating against women in the workplace, during his campaign Trump and many of his supporters continued to dwell upon Clinton’s imagined lack of stamina and fortitude.

During the campaign Trump not only panned Clinton’s physical stamina but also claimed that schools should have good exercise programs, that he was a “big believer in the whole world of sports.”^[2] In recent weeks, however, there has been a perverse turnabout in Trump’s stamina story in ways suggesting that it is his energy that is waning and that it is he who lacks stamina and fortitude. Last month he was quoted as saying that he gave up athletics in college because he “believed the human body was like a battery, with a finite amount of energy, which exercise only depleted.”^[3] Such statements would have caused Harvard’s Dr. Clarke to cheer with approval.

Curiously, his first trip overseas confirmed his most recent view of physical fitness—that he is a tired old man who has depleted much of his limited storehouse of energy. Before embarking on the nine day (plus two more traveling) excursion to Saudi Arabia, Israel and the West Bank, Rome and the Vatican, Brussels for NATO meetings, and Sicily for a G7 conference, it was reported that he wanted to cancel or shorten the trip.^[4] And there was plenty of evidence that his fears of exhaustion were fully justified. Just three days into the trip, it was widely reported that he, indeed, was so exhausted that he sent his daughter to a Fox program he was originally scheduled to attend and that he misspoke during his first major address in Saudi Arabia because of weariness, using the politically charged word “Islamic” rather than “Islamist” to describe terrorists.^[5] Then, of course, there was the famous golf cart ride on the last day of the trip in Sicily. After a photo-op at the top of a hill at the site of an ancient amphitheater, the program called for the G7 leadership to take a 700 yard stroll downhill through Taormina, Sicily to a plaza selected for a second group photograph. But Trump stayed behind on the hilltop rather than join the others in their walk. After waiting for a time, walking a short distance, ducking into a building where he changed from a red and white striped tie to a solid red one, he then got into a golf cart for the rest of the journey. He kept the others for a time while he took his leisurely journey.^[6] News outlets around the world took the adventure not only as a slight to the various national leaders in attendance, but also as a telling symbol of the tired physical and political state of the American presidency.

It is yet another distressing example of Trump's willingness to manipulate and distort reality to suit his needs of the moment. Except that in this case, his recent signs of physical frailty and lack of stamina confirm what we have known for decades—that exercise, good eating habits, and careful life conduct have infinitely more to do with stamina than either long discredited theories regarding our supposed finite storehouse of energy or outdated “scientific” stereotypes about the physical capacities of women's minds and bodies. It only confirms what I wrote last November—that the continuing prevalence of outmoded and baseless notions of stamina have distorted the nation's ability to carefully parse the random misstatements of a politician routinely distorting reality.

[1]. One video of the event may be found at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2016/oct/02/she-cant-make-it-15ft-to-her-car-donald-trump-mocks-hillary-clinton-at-rally-video>.

[2]. James Hamblin, *No, Mr. President, Exercise Does Not Deplete Energy*, *The Atlantic* (May 15, 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/05/trumps-unfitness/526677/>

[3]. Rachael Rettner, *Trump Thinks That Exercising Too Much Uses Up the Body's 'Finite' Energy*, *Washington Post* (May 14, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/trump-thinks-that-exercising-too-much-uses-up-the-bodys-finite-energy/2017/05/12/bb0b9bda-365d-11e7-b4ee-434b6d506b37_story.html.

[4]. Daniel W. Drezner, *Trump's First Foreign Trip is All Downhill From Here*, *Washington Post* (May 22, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/05/22/trumps-first-foreign-trip-is-all-downhill-from-here/?utm_term=.9c5d46ffb3e3.

[5]. See, e.g., Caitlin Yilek, *Trump 'Exhausted' Three Days Into First Trip Abroad as President: Reports*, *Washington Examiner* (May 21, 2017), <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/trump-exhausted-three-days-into-first-trip-abroad-as-president-reports/article/2623768>; Jasmine Lee, *WH: Trump Was 'Exhausted' When He Said 'Islamic Extremism,'* *CNN* (May 23, 2017), <http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/22/politics/trump-islamic-islamist/>.

[6]. Chris York, *Donald Trump Took a Golf Cart 700 Yards and Kept C7 Leaders Waiting for Photo*, *Huffington Post* (May 28, 2017), <http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/22/politics/trump-islamic-islamist/>. Some say, of course, that he wanted to delay the proceedings as a show of power politics. Others claim he also was simply tired. Regardless, he could have played power games by walking down the hill.