

‘Macho Man’ Donald Trump May Be at a Disadvantage Against Hillary Clinton

When I played youth baseball in the early 1990s, there was a guy on my ball club who liked to intimidate the players on his side of the field nearly as much as strike fear in the hearts of opposing pitchers.

Even among teen-aged jocks, who project the alpha tendencies of great apes, some stand out for their need to put their machismo on display. This guy was our King Kong. Seemingly every time one of his own teammates struck out, popped out or hit a weak tapper to the pitcher, he'd bellow, "Lift your skirt, Alice!"

None of the guys wanted to be feminized. There were parents and siblings, and occasionally girlfriends or would-be girlfriends, in the stands. But you know who hated it most? The mothers of the other players.

So one day, when this young man struck out – or maybe he popped out or dropped a ground ball – these mothers cried out in unison: "Lift your skirt!"

In an instant, they cured him with a dose of medicine that none of his teammates could have delivered so effectively. He stopped with the Alice crap – at least during that is a preface to what I see as a glaring vulnerability for Donald Trump if he wins the Republican presidential nomination and squares off against former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton next November.

Trump has made a practice of getting the upper hand on his GOP rivals by questioning their manhood and, in the process, not so subtly suggesting he's the toughest candidate. No one has

suffered as much as former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, whom Trump describes as having “low energy.”

What he is really saying, of course, is that Bush has low testosterone, the hormone most identified with the X/Y chromosome set.

Trump shifted his tough-guy taunts to Clinton Monday. She got “schlonged” by Barack Obama in the 2008 Democratic presidential primary, Trump said, altering a Yiddish term for penis into a sexually explicit verb.

It’s a tactic that appeals to hard-core conservatives, who demean fellow Republicans by calling them “cuck-servatives” – a mash-up of cuckold and conservative – on Twitter and in other forums. That helps Trump tap a vein of conservatism that is more about perceived toughness than any particular policy.

But when it’s trained on a woman, that aggressiveness can be turned on him.

“Look at that face!” he exclaimed to a Rolling Stone reporter when Carly Fiorina appeared on a TV screen. “Would anyone vote for that?” When Fiorina was asked about it at the next debate, she responded, “I think women all over this country heard very clearly what Mr. Trump said.”

The truth is women have a lot more latitude to fight gender wars in the current electoral environment. That presents a degree of peril for Trump if he makes it to the general election, where any winning coalition would have to include moderate Republicans and independent women.

In 2010, several U.S. Senate candidates, from both parties, challenged their male opponents’ manliness. Florida Democrat Kendrick Meek, Robin Carnahan and Sharron Angle all told their rivals to “man up!” When the latter two, both women, dropped the admonition on Senator Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) and then-Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) , it didn’t make them

winners. But there's little question that they were highlight moments in the Missouri and Nevada debates, respectively.

Christine O'Donnell, the Delaware Republican famed for announcing in 2010 that she wasn't a witch, won the GOP primary that year against moderate Representative Mike Castle. "This is not a bake-off," she told him. "Get your man pants on."

Fast forward to 2014, and Republican Senate candidate Joni Ernst resurrected her moribund Iowa primary campaign with an ad in which she hinted at her toughness by talking about castrating hogs.

Clinton, for her part, has thrived when male opponents seem to range into sexist territory. Her 2000 Senate opponent in New York, Rick Lazio, learned that lesson the hard way when he got into her personal space on a debate stage. The moment basically ended his already slim hopes of capturing the Senate seat.

Barack Obama, surely knowing Clinton is less liked by men than women, said in a debate before the 2008 New Hampshire primary that Clinton was "likable enough." He and his campaign instantly recognized he'd gone too far. Clinton surged to an upset victory in the Granite State, forcing Obama into a protracted primary campaign.

Clinton's gender – the fact that she would be the nation's first female president – presents a messaging challenge for any of her Democratic and Republican rivals other than Fiorina. For most, including Trump, there's a risk in turning her into a sympathetic figure with intended or unintended sexism. For Trump, who has staked so much of his campaign on being a man among boys (and Fiorina), there's an added vulnerability if Clinton or her surrogates challenge his manhood.

That's not to say the political savant can't figure out how to

confound analysts with a strategy that defies the rules of gender politics.

But he will have to consider carefully how he'd respond, come next October, if Clinton throws out a dismissive "don't get your panties in a bunch" – or a "lift your skirt, Donella!"

Jonathan Jacob Allen, *a former Washington bureau chief for Bloomberg News, is a co-author of the New York Times-bestselling book HRC: State Secrets and the Rebirth of Hillary Clinton.*

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