



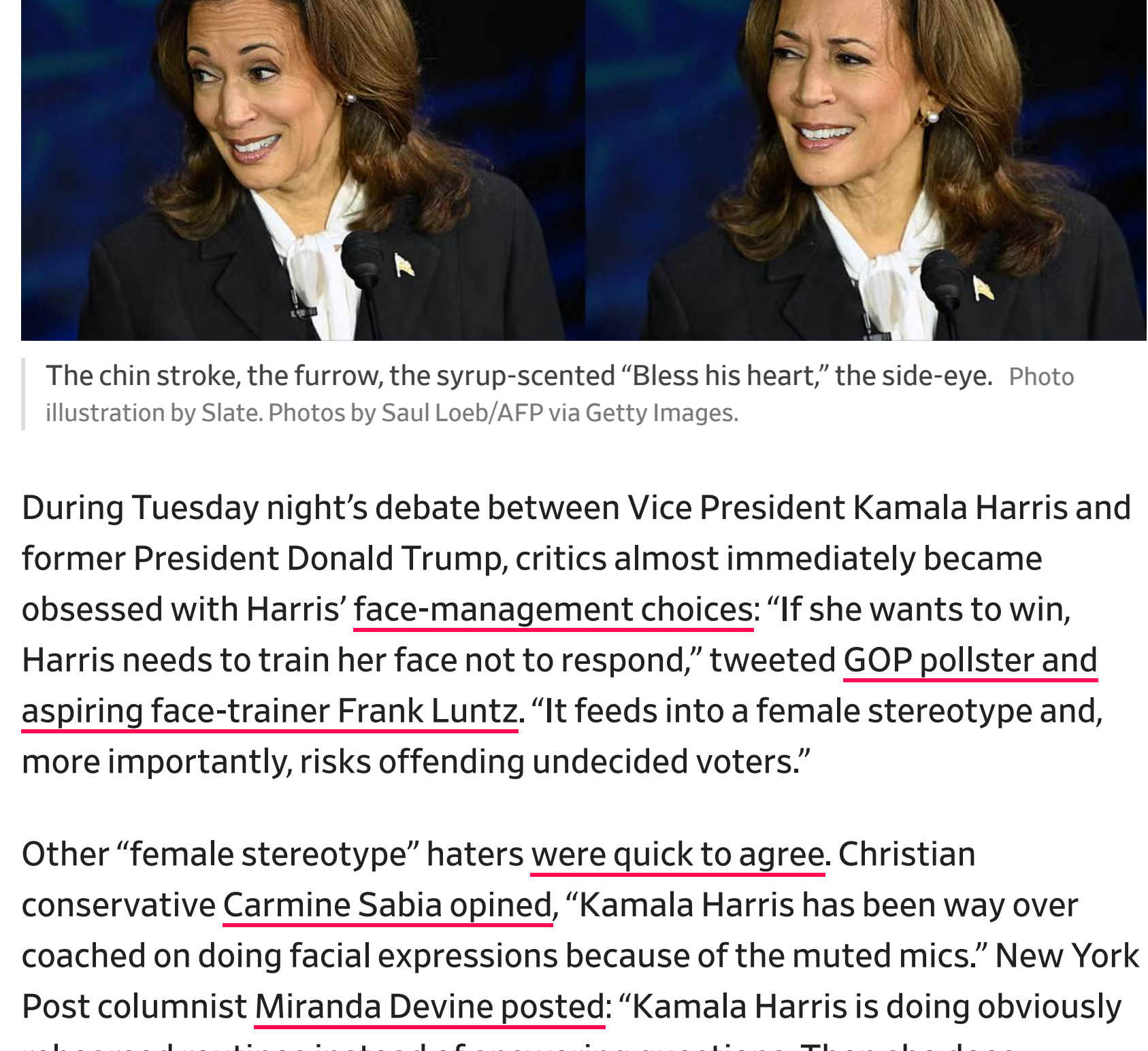
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JURISPRUDENCE

# Kamala Harris' Face on Tuesday Was the Stuff of Legend

BY DAHLIA LITHWICK  
SEPT 11, 2024 • 4:17 PM



The chin stroke, the furrow, the syrup-scented "Bless his heart," the side-eye. Photo illustration by Slate. Photos by Saul Loeb/AFP via Getty Images.

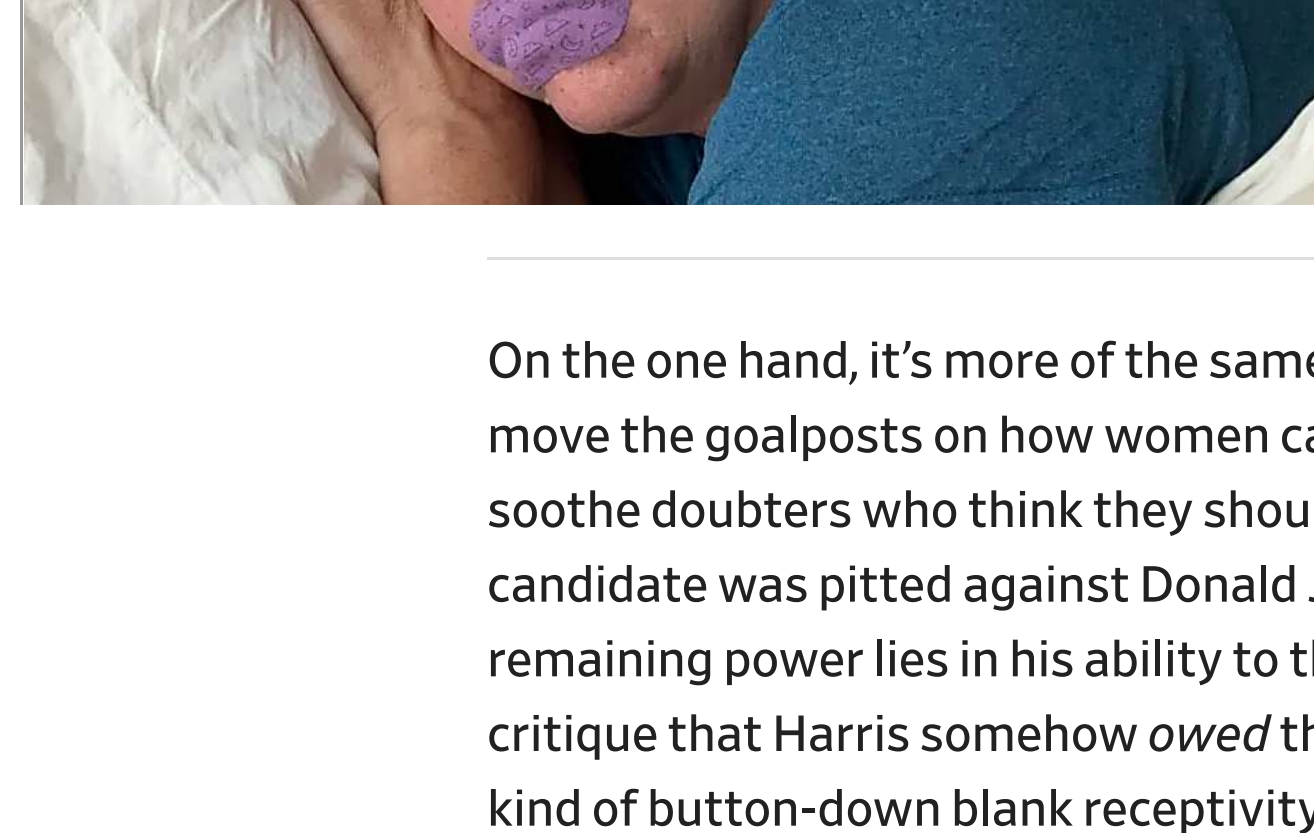
During Tuesday night's debate between Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump, critics almost immediately became obsessed with Harris' face-management choices: "If she wants to win, Harris needs to train her face not to respond," tweeted GOP pollster and aspiring face-trainer Frank Luntz. "It feeds into a female stereotype and, more importantly, risks offending undecided voters."

Other "female stereotype" haters were quick to agree. Christian conservative Carmine Sabia opined, "Kamala Harris has been way over coached on doing facial expressions because of the muted mics." New York Post columnist Miranda Devine posted: "Kamala Harris is doing obviously rehearsed routines instead of answering questions. Then she does rehearsed and exaggerated facial expressions when Trump talks. She comes across as fake and weak."

Harris fans of course begged to differ. The slow blink, the chin stroke, the quirked brow, the squinting, laughing eyes? This was the stuff of legend. It was a brilliant tactical attack on Trump's ego. It was a self-meming performance of the face of every woman who has ever been forced to listen to a bunch of unreconstructed insanity spewing from someone who has unidirectionally failed upward.

Put aside for a moment Luntz's implication that female political faces need to be trained, like small dogs or cucumber plants. There is no better proof that we still can't quite define what we require of women in public life than that we demand that their faces be either vibrant and expressive or cold and dead. I'm old enough to remember that we have, in previous iterations of this battle, mandated that women train their voices, their wardrobes, their hair, and their partners into waxy submission so as not, to quote Luntz, "risk offending undecided voters." But what does it signify that Kamala Harris, who has—against all political odds—managed to produce a voice, a wardrobe, a head of hair, and a spouse that all elicit very little horror when displayed publicly, is nevertheless excoriated for the sin of having Too Much Face?

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On the one hand, it's more of the same simple misogyny that will forever move the goalposts on how women can behave in public office so as to soothe the doubters who think they should stay out of the ring. But when the candidate was pitted against Donald J. Trump—whose only discernible remaining power lies in his ability to threaten and discomfit women—the critique that Harris somehow *owed* the public and the former president a kind of button-down blank receptivity and amiability is simply ridiculous. The assumption seems to be that Trump gets to lie about you, insult you, threaten and mischaracterize, and that—with microphones turned off by design—your political obligation is to smoothly accept it. Almost all the memes that emerged after Harris' face began to garner attention Tuesday night were variations on "When your graduate school adviser/law review editor/senior partner tells you that he'd make the changes in his draft himself but he has guests coming over for dinner and it's his job to man the sous vide." They're all about what your face reflexively does when it's not socially acceptable to speak your grievances out loud.

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It must be beyond maddening for a political actor to be summoned into a "debate" that is not really a debate, pitted against some frothing amalgam of WWE reenactor and Tasmanian devil, warned that your microphone will be muted while he is speaking, cautioned that he will be allowed to talk over you and the moderators, then be criticized for ... blinking? At some point, hopefully soon, we may all come to recognize that while Donald Trump's range of expressions exists in the almost invisible band between fury and petulance, other, regular human faces reflect the many thoughts, feelings, and expressions that human brains typically produce and that one small luxury of human existence is the power to show that to others.

Harris is exceptionally good at the furrow, the side-eye, the chin stroke, and the silent, syrup-scented "Bless his heart." And for the party that takes immense pride in having just recently eradicated a woman's ability to control her own body, the choice to dunk on a woman for refusing to control her face seems ill-advised.

Harris' face roamed free and far on Tuesday, and it was thoroughly warranted and frequently enjoyable. I think of her mobile, legible face as a satisfying call-and-response to Trump's lifelong preference for female adulation and Botox. Women have faces. Their faces have expressions. If that was upsetting to you during Tuesday's debate, you might be dismayed to learn that deep beneath our expressive faces lie thoughts, dreams, frustrations, and other markers of human agency. If a woman smiling freaks you out, imagine what happens when a woman votes. 🗳️

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