

WASHINGTON POST

Posted at 12:00 PM ET, 12/13/2011

Are Rick Perry's oopsies all in his head?

By [Melinda Henneberger](#)

[Rick Perry's oopsies](#) are stressing me out, so I can only imagine what they are doing to Rick Perry.

Most recently, the presidential hopeful referred to the bankrupt solar energy company Solyndra [as a country called "Solynda."](#) He has also [confused the voting age with the drinking age](#), said he thought there were only eight members of the Supreme Court and [has been unable to call to mind the name of Justice Sonia Sotomayor](#) ("Not Montemayor ...")

But does that mean the Texas governor is thick? Not necessarily.

[As Joel Achenbach noted](#) after Perry froze during a GOP debate and couldn't come up with the third federal agency he wants to do away with, a "brain freeze" can result from anxiety. Such moments are not so easy to pull out of, either, as the resulting "fight-or-flight" flood of adrenaline kicks in.

But can you really be the most confident guy in a state the size of France, and also someone who is, at least on occasion, paralyzed by panic? Yes, as it turns out.

Michael Leahy's [Rick Perry profile](#) in The Post this week describes the Texas governor as self-assured from the get-go: "He has always had it, an ease and a charm that only the naturals possess, a confidence that bears the stamp of a man aware of his gifts."

And the provenance of that happy "I can do this" feeling?

"It was always just there, friends say, as if coded in Perry's DNA from the time he came of age on his family's farm," Leahy writes. "The little community of Paint Creek was hugely supportive of children, and Perry thrived."

(Please no one tell my aunt, a New York stage actor who will see this as the long-awaited confirmation of her theory that those of us not originally from New York are unfairly advantaged by the confidence that is the birthright of all bigger fish making an entrance from smaller ponds. There is a downside to being the best little ballerina at the barre in somebody's basement, though; when reality kicks in, the results can be brutal.)

Leahy argues that Perry's slippery learning curve in recent months may have robbed him of some of his old sureness, and "demonstrated the limits of how far confidence can take a driven person without ample preparation."

There's little question that Perry has quite purposely avoided some of the hard work and hard knocks that would have come in handy right about now; he only rarely debated rivals in his previous races, depriving himself of the chance to get better at it, as he already was in the most recent forum Saturday.

Yet Perry's "oops" moments are now so numerous that at this point, they have got to be more about anxiety than under-preparation. Did he really not know Sotomayor's name, or think Solyndra a country? Of course not.

Only, isn't it the shy types who are more likely to lose their nerve in the spotlight? Not at all, says Dr. Stacie Isenberg, of the Washington, D.C.-based Ross Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders: "Anxiety manifests itself in lots of ways, and can go with any personality style," she said. "You can have somebody who's anxious and timid, but also someone confident can have a 'deer in the headlights' moment; the fear of being judged by other people is the ultimate set-up for social anxiety."

Of course, presidential candidates really are being judged. And once one has made a gaffe, Isenberg says, anxiety about the possible results of the mistake can feed on itself, which would explain why, instead of heading off in some other verbal direction, Perry tends to burrow in and make things worse for himself: "Hold on, I know this ..."

(As if to provide the perfect illustration of the phenomenon I was hoping Isenberg would explain, when I left a voice mail message for her, I blanked on my newish office phone number: "Wait a minute ..." Oh, subconscious, you are a riot!)

The national politician Perry most reminds me of in this regard is recent Mitt Romney endorser Dan Quayle, a perfectly intelligent guy, in many ways the best-prepared Republican presidential contender [when I was covering the field in 2000](#), yet so traumatized by the early oopsies that pegged him as a "Potatoe"-head that he continued to freeze occasionally, from nerves rather than lack of knowledge.

Isenberg said some tried-and-true strategies for extricating oneself from these situations include deep breathing, regular exercise, muscle relaxation and the simple realization that "usually, the outcome isn't as dire as you fear." In Perry's case, the worst that can happen is that he'll get to go home to the state he loves, and never have to debate again.

By [Melinda Henneberger](#) | 12:00 PM ET, 12/13/2011