

OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Fatal Conceit

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[Excerpt only]

Humans are overconfident creatures. Ninety-four percent of college professors believe they are above average teachers, and 90 percent of drivers believe they are above average behind the wheel. Researchers Paul J.H. Schoemaker and J. Edward Russo gave computer executives quizzes on their industry. Afterward, the executives estimated that they had gotten 5 percent of the answers wrong. In fact, they had gotten 80 percent of the answers wrong.



David Brooks

In moments of government overconfidence, officials come to see society not as a dynamic and complex organism, but as a machine, which can be rebuilt. In such moments, governance and engineering merge into one.

Fortunately, for those who study the human comedy, the epicenter of overconfidence moves from year to year. Up until recently, people in the financial world bathed in the warm glow of their own self-approval. Hubris in that world always takes the same form: The geniuses there come to believe that they have mastered risk. The future is an algorithm and they've cracked the code.

Over the past year, the bonfire of overconfidence has shifted to Washington. Since the masters of finance have been exposed as idiots, the masters of government have concluded (somewhat illogically) that they must be really smart.

Overconfidence in government also has a characteristic form: that of highly rational Olympians who attempt to stand above problems and solve them in a finely tuned and impartial manner.