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Brainiac energy secretary doesn't sound so sharp

Debra Saunders, San Francisco Chronicle columnist
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Energy Secretary Steven Chu testifies before a House panel on his decision to make now-bankrupt Solyndra the first recipient of a federal loan. Photo: ASSOCIATED PRESS, EVAN VUCCI / SA

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President Obama likes to brag that his energy secretary, Steven Chu, won a Nobel Prize in physics. You would think that means that Chu is a brainiac who makes shrewd decisions and is extremely aware of whatever is happening around him. But as his testimony before a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee last week revealed, there's a world of information that escapes Chu's notice.

The subcommittee is investigating Chu's decision to make Fremont, Calif., solar power company Solyndra the first recipient of a federal energy program loan in September 2009. Two years and \$528 million later, Solyndra filed for bankruptcy, and it looks as if taxpayers won't see a dime of it. The Nobel Prize winner's pet pick was a bust.

Thursday was supposed to be Chu's moment to take responsibility for this high-profile bad "bet" — as Obama once put it. Chu did say, "The final decisions on Solyndra were mine." Yet by the end of the hearing, Chu was using the passive voice and putting the onus on other people. As he looked back at the whole thing, Chu said, "decisions were made by people in the loan program," green energy is important and everyone knew "there were risks."

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