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Gary Johnson's Rick Perry moment

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In a make-or-break moment, Gary Johnson broke.

During an interview in which Johnson would later say he mentally “blanked,” the Libertarian Party presidential nominee on Thursday flubbed a question on the Syrian civil war, asking, “What is Aleppo?”

His fellow MSNBC panelists were agape, as Johnson had just claimed unfamiliarity with a city at the heart of Syria’s ongoing civil war and humanitarian crisis. Johnson spent the rest of the morning on a self-flagellating apology tour, including a brief follow-up interview with Mark Halperin in which Johnson admitted frustration at his answer, an appearance on “The View,” and a statement of public mea culpa.

It came at a particularly inopportune time for Johnson’s campaign. Johnson has hung much of his campaign strategy on qualifying for the presidential debate, and the next few weeks of polling will determine who makes the stage.

In the five polls the Presidential Debate Commission will use to determine who gets invited onto the stage later this month, candidates need to average above 15 percent. Johnson is currently averaging 8.8 percent, down from 9.2 percent the week before.

Closing that 6-plus point gap was already a challenge, as pollsters prepared for a change in their sample — away from registered voters and to “likely voters” — that seems likely to work to Johnson’s disadvantage.

Johnson got a shot of hope, however, from a Wednesday night boost from Mitt Romney, who tweeted out that he hoped voters would get to see Johnson, as well as his running mate Bill Weld, on the debate stage. It was a chance for Johnson to get a bit of what third-party candidates crave most: attention.

But not all attention is good attention, and Johnson got the bad kind in spades Thursday, evoking the cringe-worthy fallout from Rick Perry's "oops" moment in 2011.

Hillary Clinton poked fun at Johnson's gaffe — “you can find Aleppo on a map” — and House Speaker Paul Ryan took him on as well: “Well, he is an isolationist, Hugh. Let's give him the credit of the doubt on that.”

Former top Obama chief strategist David Axelrod tweeted a riff on Johnson's use of marijuana: “Maybe a good spot to play the 'Sorry, I was high' card.”

Johnson worked repeatedly to clean up the remark Thursday, saying he was familiar with the Syrian situation. Johnson, who as a Libertarian largely eschews foreign entanglements argued that Clinton has been “the architect of tragic and counter-productive policies” in Syria in an **August op-ed for The Hill**. At a Libertarian town hall hosted by CNN in June, Johnson said “there should not have been military intervention in Syria.” And in November, Johnson told Reason magazine that the U.S. needed to “take our share” of refugees coming from Syria, but he didn't give a specific number of how many should be allowed into the country.

Libertarians brushed off Johnson's stumble: “It's an unfortunate mistake. But it's not as big a mistake as a year of uninformed, authoritarian, racially charged speeches, or a career of pushing for ever-bigger government and ever-more intrusions on freedom,” said David Boaz, executive vice president of the libertarian CATO Institute.

Kerry Welsh, a Johnson donor, panned all the criticism of Johnson's initial flub.

“I think the whole kerfuffle is ridiculous. The names of obscure cities don't matter, it's the policy that counts,” Welsh said. Donald “Trump doesn't know what's in the Constitution, or how many amendments there are. His 'Two Corinthians' blunder didn't even hurt him amongst Bible Belters.”

Asked on "The View" if he could recover, Johnson was hopeful but made no promises: “Gosh, I guess people will have to make that judgment, but I will say that it is a process and I respect the process and for those that believe this is a disqualifier, so be it. But you know, I've been really well-served in my life by always telling the truth and if you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything, and I think the one unforgivable in life is hypocrisy — saying one thing and doing another.”