

# America's ailing one-trick pony

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Count the obliterated targets. Tally the corpses of senior leaders. Behold America's military prowess. By any measure, Iran has taken a pummeling. Yet threats of more US strikes are yielding no concessions. Donald Trump's threats, including bombing Iran into the Stone Age, have sounded empty since early March. Yet he keeps repeating them. Threatening a failed tactic over and over again and expecting a different outcome is the definition of insanity.

It is rightly observed that America has a greater margin of error than any other power. The US has the world's most powerful military and is flanked by vast oceans to its east and west and benign neighbours to its north and south. But such blessings can induce lazy thinking. Decades before Trump's Operation Epic Fury, America picked up the habit of confusing its military superiority with an ability to impose its will on faraway lands. The only thing that is novel about Trump's Iran war is the immediate obviousness of its bankruptcy.

Epic Fury is no departure from American tradition. When Trump was a young man pulling strings to escape military service in Vietnam — a privilege he shared with other future US presidents, including George W Bush — the Pentagon announced regular “kill ratios” of the number of enemy dead versus American. The Tet Offensive in early 1968 was heralded as a major US victory since so many Vietcong insurgents had been killed. In reality, Tet delivered a crushing political defeat to America since it conveyed the enemy's iron will.

The Pentagon did not see it that way. Pete Hegseth, the US “secretary of war”, is a very different figure to Robert McNamara, the then secretary of defence. But his playbook is similar. In crude terms, success is judged by how many things and people America can blow up. Hegseth's favourite words are “precision” and “lethality”. The similarity between Lyndon B Johnson's Operation Rolling Thunder and Trump's Epic Fury is almost exact. Just as LBJ used carpet-bombing of North Vietnam to prod elusive concessions in negotiations, Trump's missile threats are wasted on Iran. As the Taliban used to say during the two-decade US military operation in Afghanistan: “America has the watches, we have the time.” The Taliban regained power five years ago.

Trump seemed to grasp the limits of America's one-trick ponies better than most US presidents. His denouncement of Bush's Iraq war was a key propellant of his 2016 takeover of the Republican Party. The irony is that he is now riding that pony into the same old quicksand. Trump can run the gamut of America's greatest hits in the same interview. One moment he is proclaiming mission accomplished as Bush did at an early stage of the Iraq war. The next he is dangling peace with honour, as Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger

branded the US retreat from Vietnam. When his blood is really up he demands second world war-style unconditional surrender.

But his only way out is via sustained diplomacy on multiple fronts. On Monday he called off the next wave of strikes on Iran scheduled for yesterday. He wanted to give the Pakistan-mediated talks another chance. At the forefront of Trump's mind is that he must do better than Barack Obama did with his 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Nowhere in his mind, apparently, is the recollection that it took Obama's negotiators 20 months to nail it down. The idea that much less knowledgeable US officials could do better in a few days is delusional. That Obama could have pulled off a serious agreement without once threatening to bomb Iran is inconceivable to him.

The lesson from Epic Fury is the same one that Obama drew from Iraq. Diplomacy should always be the first resort. There is no need even to mention US military power, still less to brag about it daily. To paraphrase a maxim, the military that fights best is that which fights least. The comforting take is to blame Epic Fury on Trump's unique recklessness. But he is no aberration. Once you screen out his uniquely self-defeating verbal incontinence, you discern a Washington traditionalist. His approach is the *reductio ad absurdum* of one lost US war after another preceded by strings of victories on the battlefield.

As the world googles Thucydides and digests the emerging G2 China-US reality, the question is whether Washington is capable of reinventing itself. Better informed US figures than Trump are calling on him to "finish the job" in Iran. Had they learnt from the recent or distant past, they would be revising their advice. But that would require thinking. Good strategy is the product of intellectual humility. Trump's lack of it puts him in plentiful company.