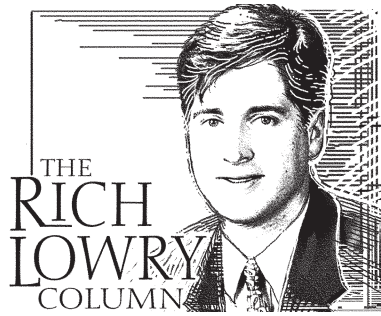


**FROM KING FEATURES WEEKLY SERVICE,
300 W. 57th Street, 41st Floor, New York, NY
10019
CUSTOMER SERVICE: 800-708-7311 EXT. 257
THE RICH LOWRY COLUMN**

FOR RELEASE JUNE 29, 2026

By Rich Lowry



Why Trump couldn't bring Iran to heel

Iran, a second-rate power in a state of economic collapse, just fought the U.S. to a standstill in a major military conflict. The disappointing outcome has echoes of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, in that a major world power hasn't been able to impose its will on a militarily inferior foe.

The problem comes when we run into an enemy that has a high threshold for pain and is determined to outlast us, while we make what we hope will be a time-limited commitment, seek to avoid escalations that carry unpredictable risks and operate from a tenuous base of domestic political support in the United States.

This is why we can utterly dominate our adversaries and still succumb to asymmetric campaigns of attrition; it explains, in short, why in the post-World War II era, we haven't lost battles, only wars.

It's extraordinary to think that, in the struggle over control of the Strait of Hormuz, the country that has carrier fleets and advanced fighters effectively lost to the country that has drones and fast boats. We didn't lack the capability to reopen the strait; we lacked the stomach for a risky and protracted operation.

The famous Taliban adage was, "You have the watches, but we have the time." George C. Marshall once said the U.S. couldn't fight a Seven Years' War; the outcome of the Iran conflict suggests we can't even tolerate a seven-month one.

Trump pushed back against impatience about the pace of the war by saying that Vietnam lasted years. True enough, but Trump was almost as eager to see an end to the war as his critics. He originally conceived of it as a four- to six-week operation, and when it dragged on, he could only tolerate high gas prices ahead of the mid-term elections for so long.

We tend to believe that our ability to

missile, bomb and shell our enemies at levels never before seen in human history guarantees military success.

As Max Boot notes in his book on America's small wars, "The Savage Wars of Peace," when queried by a reporter about how the Americans would defeat the Viet Cong, Gen. William Westmoreland responded simply: "Firepower."

We possessed it in abundance, then as now. Boot writes: "The U.S. side had sensors, ground radar, infrared equipment, defoliants, herbicides, cluster bombs, missiles of various varieties, tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery of various calibers, naval vessels ranging from small patrol boats to giant nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and, of course, all the aircraft — everything from B-52 bombers to UH-1 Huey helicopters to specially fitted C-47 airplanes known as Puff the Magic Dragon equipped with automatic machine guns capable of spitting out 6,000 rounds a minute."

All told, LBJ's bombing campaign, Rolling Thunder, unloaded roughly 800 tons of ordnance a day for three and a half years, according to Boot. Throughout the entire war, the U.S. dropped 8 million tons of bombs, far eclipsing what we used in World War II. Much of this was the equivalent of Joseph Conrad's gunboat futilely firing into the jungle in "Heart of Darkness."

The target list in Iran was more discriminating and achieved concrete goals of degrading the regime's military and industrial capacity. But the idea that simply listing the number of targets hit, or saying we were "ahead of schedule," proved that we were close to achieving strategic goals — toppling the regime, or getting it to give up its highly enriched uranium, or reopening the Strait of Hormuz — smacked of the empty bean-counting that characterized the U.S. government's defense of the conduct of the Vietnam War.

Every war depends on a combination of capability and will. In Iran, we demonstrated that our weapons systems and warfighters are world-class, but that our staying power and willingness to bear costs are limited. That's why we're allowing a cruel and deranged enemy that absorbed untold punishment to win significant benefits at the negotiating table, and live to fight another day.

Rich Lowry is editor of the National Review.

© 2026 by King Features Synd., Inc.