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## The shape of wars to come

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My handy digital Bush countdown clock tells me there are 185 days left until George Bush leaves the White House. We will all have our memories of his eight years in office, but one that sticks in the mind is the moment in May 2003 when he stood on the deck of an American aircraft-carrier and announced the end of large-scale combat operations in Iraq. The notorious banner behind him read "Mission Accomplished". "Mission: Impossible" might have been more like it.

There is a better reason than Bush's hubris to remember that moment. It marked the end of the last war fought between two sovereign states. In this case, the enemies were the United States and Saddam Hussein's Republic of Iraq. Not long after, the new Iraqi Government regained its sovereignty and began to carry on military operations in alliance with coalition forces. Bush's announcement was clearly not the end of the war in Iraq. But it did end formal interstate warfare, at least for the present.

If this was the war to end all wars, why does the world still seem to be such a violent place? Because all its major conflicts are now civil wars, conflicts fought within states not between them. In 2006, the last year for which we have an accurate count, there were 32 civil wars in progress, from Afghanistan to Sudan. And since 1989, 115 of the world's 122 wars have been civil wars rather than international wars, though many of these civil conflicts have also drawn in outside powers.

The number of wars between states declined rapidly in the second half of the 20th century. If we're lucky, such conventional inter-state wars may even be extinct. That's an important achievement of collective security for which we can all be glad. Veterans of the Cold War, theorists of the "end of history" such as Francis Fukuyama, and those who believe democracies never go to war with each other, have been telling us for some time that war is a thing of the past. They may be right but, so far, only about regions such as western Europe, North America and Australasia.

Since 1945 the richest parts of the world have been enjoying a long peace. At the same time, nearly three-quarters of the people in the world's 50 poorest countries - those the economist Paul Collier has called "the bottom billion" - have suffered the long agony of civil war. It seems civil war, like the poor, will always be with us. And the poor will disproportionately bear the brunt of it.

The prominence of civil war is nothing new in world history. For at least 2000 years civil war has been the most frequent form of collective human conflict. It has also been among the most

ferocious. In the first century BC, at the height of Rome's civil wars, about a quarter of all male citizens aged between 17 and 46 were in arms. About 1700 years later, probably a greater proportion of England's population died during the civil wars of the 1640s than perished in World War I. Two centuries later still, the military death toll in the US Civil War was six times larger, relative to size of population, than the casualty rate in World War II.

The costs of civil war are still mounting. Development economists have recently put a lot of energy into calculating the impact of civil war and have come up with some hair-raising conclusions. The average cost of a civil war, in terms of lives and income lost and productive resources squandered, is almost \$US60 billion (\$61.8 billion). With roughly two new civil wars starting every year in the past half-century, that makes an annual price tag of about \$US120 billion. To put this in perspective, that's more than the developed world spends on aid to developing countries each year.

Economists, political scientists and, increasingly, historians are taking civil war as seriously as it deserves. However, it is not clear whether the world's militaries are doing the same. Just take one example: in February the US Army issued the first revision since September 11, 2001, of its Operations Manual (FM 3-0). Its 180 tightly packed pages included only one paragraph on civil wars, with the unenlightening advice that they "often include major combat operations" and can lead to "massive casualties".

Look around the world's hotspots, at Iraq, Afghanistan and Darfur, for instance, and it is clear that most of the places to which countries such as the United States, Britain and Australia have been asked to send troops are in the grip of civil war. Other places, such as Lebanon, Kenya, and now Zimbabwe, have skirted civil war in recent months.

Our leaders need to face the fact that this is likely to remain the shape of wars to come around the world and for the foreseeable future. If they do not, it is hard to see how there can be any hope that their military and humanitarian missions will not end up being "accomplished" the way George Bush's has been in Iraq.

David Armitage is the Lloyd C. Blankfein Professor of History at Harvard University. He will be speaking at Sydney Ideas, the university's international public lecture series at 6.30pm on Thursday at the Seymour Theatre Centre.

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