



# CIVIL WARS

Award-winning author and Harvard University Professor **DAVID ARMITAGE** traced the deadly path of civil wars throughout history in a Sydney Ideas lecture last July. **OLGA YOLDI** reports.

Civil wars are the most fearsome, the most frequent form of human conflict that continues to haunt humanity," said Professor David Armitage, an historian, and guest of the University of Sydney's International Program Development Fund.

Currently more than 30 non-declared civil wars are being fought around the world at a cost of US\$120 billion per annum. This is more than what the international community spends

each year in aid to developing countries.

An authority on civil wars from ancient to modern times, and author of *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, Professor Armitage said that no other kind of collective violence parallels its impact, the lives lost, communities shattered, and histories defined. "Civil wars tend to linger in the memory of individuals, families and nations much longer than any other type of conflict," he said. "Overall civil

wars tend to be longer in duration, higher in casualties, more costly and with longer lasting social ramifications than wars between opposite nations.”

However, by studying civil wars throughout history, Professor Armitage said they could “tell us what people hold most dear and what they are prepared to fight for. And most of all, it reveals what communities they think they belong to.”

Since 1989, 115 of the world’s 122 wars have been intra-national rather than

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international wars. Professor Armitage said that it was Roman history, law and literature that formed the idea of civil war.

“At the height of Rome’s civil war in the first century BC perhaps a quarter of male citizens aged 17 to 46 were in arms. 1,700 years later a bigger proportion of England’s population died in the civil war of the 1640s than perished in WWI. Two centuries later still, the death toll in the American civil war was six times larger (relative to the size of the population) than the casualty rate of WWII,” he said. “Slaughter of such magnitude shattered communities, shaped nations and scarred imaginations.”

In the first half of the 20th century civil wars were pivotal events in China, Russia, Spain, Ireland and Greece. And in the last 50 years almost half of the world’s countries, especially the poorest, have suffered civil wars.

Many of these conflicts have been caused by increased poverty and social exclusion, which has exacerbated existing political, ethnic and religious tensions. Many have become endless, protracted civil wars where the worst atrocities are still being committed. Some of these conflicts have spilled over into neighbouring countries or have drawn in outside powers causing regional disruption.

In some countries, conflicts that

began as genuine national uprisings against governments, degenerated into vicious fights over land and other resources among militias or paramilitary groups who, in some cases, were no different from criminal gangs.

In many cases these wars are of little interest to great powers since there are no territorial or security interests at stake and therefore they can be allowed to go on forever.

Some of these conflicts tend to go through cycles of intermittent violence interrupted by continuous armed truces with rebounds of combat, where rebel groups dispute among themselves the monopoly of violence. Such conflicts have

transformed nation states into what political scientist Oswaldo de Riveiro has defined as “Chaotic, Ungovernable Entities.” When this takes place governments become powerless and unable to control their national territory or the population. Whole sectors of the economy, cities and provinces fall under the power of the new warlords, drug lords or mafias.

Professor Armitage predicts that most conflicts in the foreseeable future will be civil wars. His lecture traced the history in the ideas of civil wars; the semantics and definitions. Why are some conflicts defined as civil wars by the international community while others aren’t? He explained that describing civil war has been much easier than defining it because its definitions have led to vigorous debates and spectacular disagreements throughout history.

The current disagreements over Iraq is indicative that the debate continues. Only in 2006 did some American newspapers concede that the conflict was in fact a civil war, although the Bush Administration denied it. It used terms such as ‘terrorism’, ‘insurgency’, ‘a political military struggle for power’ to define the conflict, but never ‘civil war’. Two British journalists also refused to define it as a civil war because it was “fragmented, partly made up of non-Iraqi insurgents

and part Iraqis, fighting for ends more contradictory than seizing power, so the Iraqi troubles did not qualify as civil war. Professor Armitage said that what was at stake in applying or withholding the term civil war in relation to Iraq was nothing less than the continuous presence of the US and the coalition forces.

The definition of civil war used by most political scientists stipulates that, “it must be a sustained military combat, primarily internal, resulting in at least 1,000 battlefield deaths per year, pitting central government forces against insurgent forces capable of inflicting upon the government forces of at least five percent of the fatalities the insurgents sustained”. However, many of the current conflicts may not necessarily fit into this definition.

What are the implications of calling a conflict a civil war? According to Professor Armitage, civil wars are perceived as purely internal matters, as someone else’s business, so the consequence of these definitions can become a matter of life and death for vulnerable populations. “Can we call the conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda civil wars? And allow the rest of the world to wash their hands of responsibility for what took place behind closed and sovereign borders?”

And what about Darfur? Darfur could be defined as a civil war, but it could also be defined as genocide, tribal infighting, as an ethnic conflict, or even as an endless and intractable political conflict that is beyond hope of resolution. Professor Armitage said definitions matter because they create different reactions, and raise different conceptions of political responsibility, and have moral and political consequences.

He mentioned that social scientists had invested significant resources into researching the factors that determine the onset of a civil war, its duration and its intensity; how civil wars end and why they seem so often to recur.

What factors cause such fragmentation in a community that can lead to a civil conflict? He mentioned social scientists normally take into consideration factors such as income inequality, religious

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differences in the population, or even how mountainous a terrain is. All these factors can play a role in determining the onset of a civil war and its duration. This research is useful because it can predict how long these conflicts tend to last. It can help governments and aid agencies plan for action. Of course all those decisions depend on the quality and relevance of the data.

He mentioned that some wars have been rebranded as revolutions, depending on who is writing the history. In the US there is still vigorous debate over whether the civil war was in fact a civil war or a revolution. He cited major revolutions such as the Russian, Chinese, Cuban and Iranian revolutions. "They were international as well as national events and shook the world like no other political tremors. Their end marked decisive breaks with the past and an opening of a new world order". "Some of the revolutions of the 19th and 20th Centuries were ideologically closer to the American ideals of universal freedom, and the ideals of the French revolution, such as the Declaration of The Rights of Man. But it was Marx's theory of history as a class struggle that radically shifted communities".

He mentioned that in light of such revolutions, civil wars could be seen as retrograde, pointless and sterile by comparison since there was no promise of liberation but only destruction." However, he said that such revolutions were in essence just civil wars.

A major shift in the concept of war emerged during the Cold War between the communist nations led by the Soviet Union and the democratic nations led by the US. This was a war between two ideologies and two opposing systems of government. This war has been defined as a "global civil war". A war that, according to John Kennedy, tormented and divided mankind and polarized nations.

This was followed by transnational

terrorism, which Professor Armitage defined as a war against all, as "the unrivalled struggle between transnational terrorists such as Al Qaeda and opposed parties, without any of the constraints placed upon conventional forms of warfare".

Professor Armitage said that because most wars in the future would be civil, there was a need for ideas to prevent them; for new protocols to safeguard the security of civilians, and above all for new strategies to alleviate the developing world's long agony, as they are mostly the ones living the reality of violence of war on a daily basis.

Will there ever be peace in the world? Jean Henri Dunant, who founded the Red Cross in 1864, believed that war as an essential ritual of human society may be tamed but would never be eradicated. Perhaps it has been tamed through politics. However, according to Harvard professor of psychology Steven Pinker, this is the most peaceful time in our species' existence. We are currently benefiting from a long and steady decline in human violence, a phenomenon which, according to him started in the 16th century with the Age of Reason - particularly in England and Holland. "Even in the short term," he adds "violence is on the wane." According to Professor Pinker there have been fewer genocides and fewer civil wars in the last centuries.

Although this notion may seem somewhere between hallucinatory and obscene, particularly when one thinks about Darfur and Iraq, recent studies that quantify the historical ebb and flow of violence point to exactly that conclusion.

However, in modern ethics war is inhuman and it is simply undefendable. In the age of progress, human rights, and pacifism, war continues to be our greatest paradox. ■

