

The number of conflicts around the globe has dropped over the past decade.

BY FRANK GREVE

Knight Ridder Newspapers

WASHINGTON — Here are some war stories from 2005 that you might have missed:

Shiite Muslim rebels in northern Yemen are giving up. Islamic extremists in Algeria are, too. In Burundi, peaceful elections ended 20 years of bloody civil war. Rebels in Sumatra disarmed after 29 years to participate in elections.

It seems that armed combat is falling out of fashion. According to war historians, the number of conflicts worldwide declined sharply in the past decade, and their overall lethality is the lowest since the 1950s.

Some war historians think the lull is temporary. Others, such as John Mueller of the Ohio State University, think that war has become, at least in developed countries, as obsolete as slavery or dueling. He deems this shift "one of the most important developments in the history of the world."

Terrorism is up, to be sure, but so far it's been killing far fewer people than major clashes between industrialized states did in the past. By Mueller's tally, only in one year, 2001, did terrorism kill more people in a year than World War II did every hour, on average — 1,200 combatants and civilians.

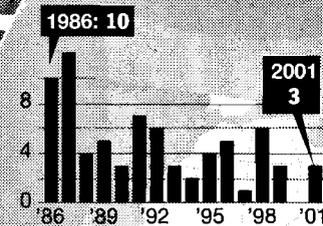
The current toll from terrorism, however, doesn't count the victims of Iraqi and Afghan suicide bombings and other insurgent attacks, which are considered combat deaths. Moreover, a major terrorist

Wars in decline globally

Highlights of a new study that shows wars are on the wane worldwide:

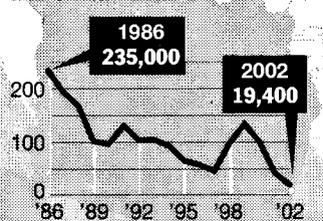
International crises

Risk of conflict; leaders pressed to act



Battle deaths

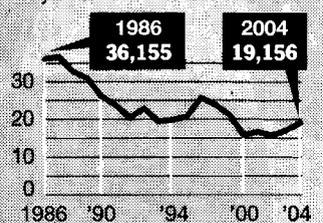
Combat-related military and civilian deaths



Why decline is happening

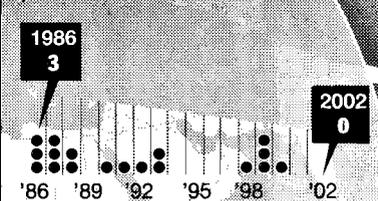
Drop in arms trade

Major arms transfers worldwide



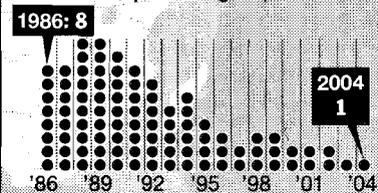
International wars

At least one warring party is a government; at least 1,000 battle deaths



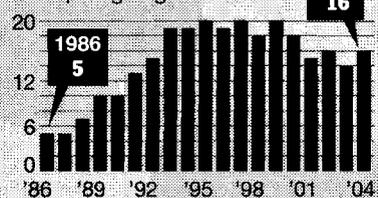
Genocide

Acts by governments or their opponents intended to destroy an ethnic or political group



Increase in peace efforts

U.N. peacemaking activities to stop ongoing conflicts



Source: Human Security Report published by the University of British Columbia, International Crisis Behavior Project. Graphic: T.G. Tso, Judy Treible

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attack with chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapons could

change the picture in an instant, and so could another major war, say be-

tween India and Pakistan.

Nevertheless, at least four academic centers that track world conflicts report the same downward trend in global warfare and lesser conflicts: the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo, Norway, the Center for International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland in College Park and the Human Security Centre at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

The biggest change, experts agree, is the virtual end of wars among industrialized states, mainly Europe's. The 60 years since their last clash in World War II is the longest period of peace in Europe since the Romans ruled much of the continent.

Worldwide, the deadliest conflicts — those with 1,000 or more battle deaths a year — are down 80 percent since 1992, according to the Human Security Centre's latest tally. That mainly reflects two shifts: a decline in wars between countries and a decline in civil wars, which is attributable, in large measure, to effective international peacekeeping.

Globally, here's what's happened: ■ The number of conflicts rose steadily from the early 1950s until about 1992, then dropped sharply. Today, 20 to 30 armed conflicts are under way worldwide, depending on the definition. That's down from 50 to 60 in 1992. None pits highly developed countries against one another, although several are "asymmetric" conflicts between industrialized countries and relatively primitive enemies.

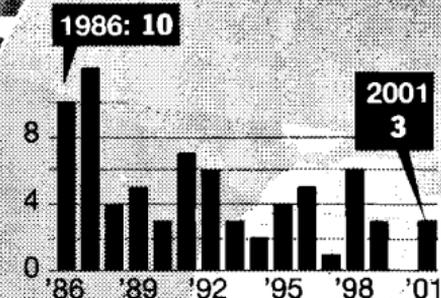
■ Combat deaths worldwide haven't topped a half-million since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Before that, they ran 1 million to 3 million a year in World War I and 3 million to 4 million a year in World War II. In recent years, the numbers have

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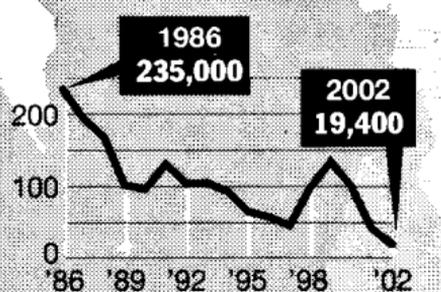
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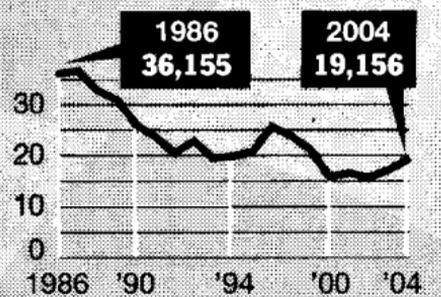
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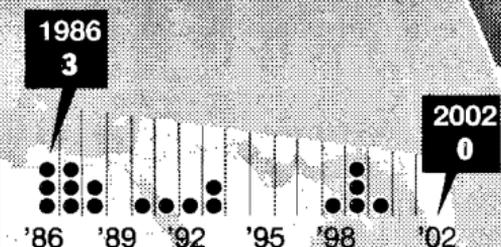
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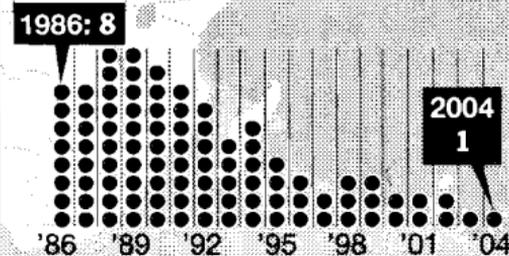
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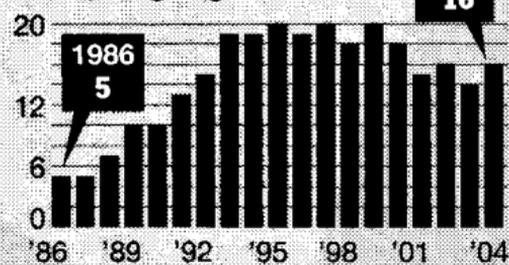
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been between 20,000 and 30,000. The reason: Asymmetric conflicts such as the war in Iraq and low-intensity ones don't kill as many people.

■ The decline in combat lethality is even more dramatic when adjusted for population growth. In the 1970s, combat-related deaths killed about 1.2 people out of every 1,000. Today, the number is less than 0.4. (Note that combat deaths don't include deaths from war-related starvation and disease, deaths in ethnic conflicts that don't involve states or unopposed massacres.)

What's causing the declines, aside from peace in Europe?

■ The Cold War, which ended in 1992, also ended proxy wars that pitted U.S.- and Soviet-backed forces against each other. Superpower support helped fuel conflicts in, for example, Vietnam, Central America, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Angola. Experts estimate that while it lasted, the Cold War fueled a third of all international armed conflicts.

■ Wars to liberate colonies, often followed by civil wars over who'd govern them next, were another staple of global conflict in the 1950s and 1960s. Today, most of those are over.

■ The most lethal conflicts today are in Iraq, Afghanistan and Russia, and they pit Islamic militants, terrorists and other lightly armed foes against highly industrialized forces. While the numbers killed are small compared with clashes of the past century, conflicts involving Islamic terrorism are growing in number and deadliness, said Monty Marshall, a scholar at Maryland's Center for International Development and Conflict Management.

If war is falling out of fashion, Americans may be among the last to notice it. The United States has fought 16 armed conflicts since 1946. Only the United Kingdom, with 21, and France, with 19, have fought

more, according to the University of British Columbia's 2005 Human Security Report, which analyzes trends in political violence worldwide.

Although the United States remains embroiled in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, tolerance of U.S. casualties may be falling sharply. Polls in 2005 reported that a plurality of Americans turned against the war in Iraq after roughly 1,500 U.S. combat deaths. The turning point in Vietnam came after 28,000.

For optimists worldwide, here are some hopeful signs for the future:

■ The number of international crises — defined as situations that leaders consider imminently threatening to their countries' security — has declined by more than two-thirds since 1981, according to the Human Security Report.

■ Instances of genocide and mass killings of ideological foes are also down from 10 a year in the early 1990s to one in 2004, according to Barbara Harff, a conflict historian at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. That one is grave, however: It's in Darfur, Sudan, where Arab militias have killed at least 70,000 black Africans.

■ In 1946, 20 nations in the world were democracies, according to the Maryland institute's Peace and Conflict 2005 report. Today, 88 countries are. Many scholars contend that democracies go to war more slowly and rarely fight one another.

■ The number of United Nations peacekeeping operations more than doubled from 1988 to 2005, from seven to 17.

"Until the 1990s, the international community did little to stop wars. Now it does lots," said Andrew Mack, the director of the University of British Columbia's Human Security Centre. And it's working, Mack added, citing a report by the Rand Corp., a U.S. research center, that two-thirds of U.N. peacekeeping efforts succeed.