

Australian Prime Minister Rudd glorifies Vietnam War

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Six months after the Australian Labor Party defeated the Howard government in the November 2007 election on the basis of—among other factors—mass antiwar sentiment, militarism remains at the centre of Labor’s foreign policy.

The transition from former Liberal Prime Minister Howard to Labor’s Kevin Rudd has been seamless. Rudd has guaranteed his government’s commitment to the US-Australia alliance, continued its practical support for the war in Iraq and increased its troop deployment to Afghanistan. In the immediate region, Australian troops and federal police remain in the Solomon Islands and East Timor to protect Australian corporate and strategic interests.

Labor’s first budget cut spending in every area except the military, federal police and intelligence agencies. Billions have been allocated to fund current overseas deployments, as well as planned purchases of new fighter-bombers and warships. The federal police will be boosted by 500 officers while the Howard government’s “Gap Year” recruitment program, aimed at bribing financially-strapped youth to enlist for a “try before you buy” 12 months in the army, and at providing the manpower for two extra infantry battalions, will continue.

In May, Rudd delivered two essentially pro-war speeches to mark the 40th anniversary of a series of engagements during the Vietnam War—the Battles of Fire Bases’ Coral and Balmoral.

Rudd glorified the Australian Task Force in Vietnam and its tactical victory over Vietnamese units that had attempted to overrun its bases to the east of Saigon between May 12 and June 6, 1968. Around 300 Vietnamese soldiers were killed, while 26 Australians lost their lives and another 110 were wounded. Fifteen of the dead were “nashos”—young men conscripted into national military service at the age of 20.

Rudd boasted to audiences, including veterans of the battles, that the “enemy got a little more than they were bargaining for”. “You did not just defend, you took the fight up to the enemy”; “everyone played their part with distinction”; and “in spite of the risks you faced you got on with it”.

The most striking aspect of the speeches, however, was Rudd’s refusal to acknowledge that the majority of Australians came to oppose the Vietnam War and felt a deep sense of shame over the country’s involvement in it.

Instead, Rudd declared: “We have not always been good at thanking our Vietnam veterans. In fact, at times we’ve been very bad at it. The time has well and truly come to turn the page and to turn the corner... To thank you all on behalf of a grateful nation for

doing your duty to the nation.... We are proud of your achievements, we are proud of your achievements in the profession of arms.... let us never forget our men and women in uniform, those who have worn the uniform and those who still, in conflicts abroad, wear the uniform today, because there is no higher calling in this great nation Australia than to wear our nation’s uniform.”

Rudd’s remarks constitute a gross falsification of history. Millions of people who lived through the Vietnam War did not glorify the actions of the Australian military, not out of any animosity to the troops, but because they opposed both the war and the political agenda that lay behind it.

Rudd himself joined the Labor Party at the age of 15 in 1972, when it was claiming to lead the opposition to Australian involvement. No Labor politician at that time could have publicly spoken of being “proud” of what Australian soldiers were doing. Such a statement implies support for the war’s objectives and the majority of Labor voters did not. Rudd’s own brother fought in Vietnam in 1969-1970 and, like many veterans, returned home questioning its legitimacy.

The Vietnam War was a war for imperialist domination. The US intervened to maintain a brutal and corrupt puppet state in South Vietnam, the war cost the lives of over three million Vietnamese and some 58,000 American troops. Australian casualties were 520 dead and more than 3,000 wounded.

Australian military trainers were first sent to South Vietnam in 1962. On April 29, 1965, the conservative Coalition government of Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced that combat troops would be sent in response to a request from the South Vietnamese regime. This was later exposed as a lie. Neither South Vietnam, nor the United States, had requested Australian combat units. The Menzies government, in fact, volunteered them. To provide the manpower for a sizeable force, national service was reintroduced in 1964 and legislation enacted in May 1965 to permit conscripts to be sent to fight overseas.

Menzies’ motive was to strengthen the postwar ANZUS alliance, which Australia had cemented with the US in the aftermath of World War II, replacing its previous military reliance on Britain. Canberra’s greatest concern was the anti-colonial ferment in Indonesia and the prospect of confrontation over Australia’s control of its colony in Papua New Guinea. The Australian establishment was unsure just how much it could depend on the US for support. In 1962, Washington, in order not to

alienate the pro-US factions of the Indonesian military, had refused to back the Dutch in their attempts to prevent Indonesia from taking over West Papua.

Sending troops to Vietnam represented Menzies' down payment for Washington's assistance in protecting Australian interests. In October 1965, Canberra was reassured by the CIA's active role in backing Indonesian general Suharto in the overthrow of the nationalist president Sukarno and the unleashing of a bloodbath that claimed the lives of between half a million and a million supporters of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI).

The Labor Party opposition voted against conscription and the deployment of combat troops to Vietnam, not on principle, but on the grounds that it was not in US or Australian interests to become embroiled in what it regarded as a civil war in Vietnam. In 1967, however, the Labor leader Gough Whitlam prevailed on the left-wing faction of the party to drop from Labor's platform any reference to the withdrawal of Australian troops, blaming the demand for poor results in the 1966 election.

By the October 1969 election, public opinion had shifted dramatically against the war. The Tet offensive in the first months of 1968 shattered US claims that it was winning the war. Even those who had accepted the official justification for the war—that it was necessary to stop South East Asian states falling like “dominoes” to “communism”—now viewed it as a lost cause. Television coverage and the exposure of atrocities such as the My Lai massacre gave glimpses of the murderous methods the US military was utilising in its attempts to crush Vietnamese resistance.

In the midst of the 1969 election, Whitlam adapted to the rapid growth of antiwar sentiment and called for the withdrawal of Australian combat troops by June 1970. The Nixon administration in the US had already announced the staged withdrawal of American troops, so Whitlam felt confident the US alliance would not be affected.

Labor did not win office in 1969, but antiwar sentiment was a major factor in a seven percent increase in its vote and 18 additional seats in the 125-seat parliament. Over the next three years, the antiwar movement grew exponentially. In 1970, the first “moratorium” march was held, coinciding with demonstrations in the US. More than 100,000 marched in Melbourne in the largest political protest in Australia since the anti-conscription rallies of 1916 and 1917. Two more moratoriums, in September 1970 and June 1971, drew hundreds of thousands of people into the streets throughout the country.

In 1970, the McMahon Coalition government began drawing down troop numbers in Vietnam. By the December 1972 election, there were less than 150 Australian trainers there, but antiwar sentiment still played a major role in sweeping Labor into office for the first time since 1949, ending 23 years of conservative rule. The last Australian military personnel were withdrawn from Vietnam shortly after.

Opposition to the carnage and criminality of the Vietnam War both fed into and fed off a far broader political ferment, marked above all by the entry of the working class into major struggles around the world. The conflict was understood by the most class conscious layers as inseparable from the determination of small

capitalist elites to preserve their privileges and wealth against the demands of the majority for greater social equality and democratic rights.

Popular distrust of official justifications for foreign military interventions was one of the main legacies of the antiwar movement, in both Australia and the United States. Large sections of the population were not prepared to accept soldiers dying for causes they believed were unjust.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan, then Republican candidate for US President, coined the term “Vietnam Syndrome” to describe the seething resentment felt by the US political and military establishment towards the prospect of mass domestic opposition in reaction to any new war.

Reagan cynically appealed to the alleged “shabby” treatment of Vietnam veterans to argue for the revival of unfettered American militarism. He insisted that the US had fought for a “noble cause” in Vietnam and that “we dishonour the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt, as if we were doing something shameful”.

Rudd's speeches last month echo Reagan's sentiments. Thirty-six years after its criminal involvement in Vietnam, the Australian establishment still feels constrained in its deployment of the armed forces. While the Howard government supported the illegal US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, it restricted its military contributions to operations involving minimal opportunities for Australian casualties. Howard's troop deployments into East Timor and the Solomon Islands were likewise carefully orchestrated to avoid open combat and the prospect of body bags returning home.

The Labor Party has returned to office at a time when such caution has become a definite obstacle to Australian imperialist interests. In the immediate period, Washington wants Canberra to increase its military commitment in Afghanistan, exposing Australian troops to greater danger. At the same time, growing opposition to Australia's neo-colonial operations throughout the Pacific region may soon see Canberra using open military force to put down local unrest.

Rudd's glorification of the Australian military in the Vietnam War had nothing to do with concern for the feelings or well-being of Vietnam veterans. His preoccupation is with the present, not the past. He is preparing to dispatch ever larger numbers of soldiers to protect the geo-political, strategic and financial interests of Australia's corporate elite in theatres around the world—from the Middle East, to Central Asia and the South Pacific. This requires the cultivation of a social base that glorifies militarism along with a climate in which opponents of neo-colonial wars are denounced for “dishonouring the troops”.



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