Australian Labor "left" bestows medal on General Petraeus

Laura Tiernan
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Every so often a news photograph is published which gives vivid expression to a political relationship. The 1998 photograph of International Monetary Fund managing director Michel Camdessus standing over former Indonesian President Suharto as he signed an agreement to implement a series of IMF-dictated measures during the Asian financial crisis was one of these.

Now another has been produced. It is the photograph published in yesterday's press of John Faulkner, the Defence Minister in the Australian Labor government, draping an honorary Order of Australia around the neck of US General David Petraeus at a ceremony in Washington on Wednesday.

Faulkner presented the award insignia to Petraeus on behalf of Australia's Governor General Quentin Bryce "for distinguished service" in Iraq.

Petraeus, a four-star general, who is now head of US Central Command, led Coalition forces in Iraq for 18 months from January 2007 to October 2008. He was the architect of the Bush administration's "surge" policy that saw 20,000 additional US soldiers sent to Iraq—five additional brigades—and a further 4,000 Marines. The "surge", carried out in the face of mass popular opposition to the Iraq war, was backed by Congressional Democrats.

The Australian Labor Party (ALP) has played a parallel role to that of the US Democrats, serving as chief enabler for the escalation of militarism.

Faulkner has been a leading "left" in the New South Wales branch of the ALP for decades. A federal senator for NSW since 1989, he served as "kingmaker" and then right-hand man to Kevin Rudd during the 2007 federal election campaign. He was appointed defence minister by the prime minister in June 2009, part of a major cabinet reshuffle that saw several "lefts" (including former union bureaucrats such as Greg Combet) elevated to key positions.

The words of Faulkner's speech were as explicit as the picture in depicting the real relationship between the Labor government and US imperialism.

"Tonight we recognise it was you, General Petraeus, who designed and implemented the strategy which delivered success in the war," Faulkner said. "This award recognises your achievement."

Flanked by top military officials who had gathered at the Australian ambassador's residence in Washington, Faulkner praised Petraeus for his integrity and reputation, declaring he had "greatly strengthened the Australian and United States military relationship".

Some press reports have commented on the supposed contradiction between Faulkner's fawning over Petraeus in Washington and the "opposition" of the Labor Party to the Iraq war. In reality there is no contradiction at all.

When US-led forces invaded Iraq in March 2003, Labor backed Australia's involvement. Then, when occupation turned to quagmire, the ALP's "opposition" consisted of a campaign to have Australian combat forces re-deployed to Afghanistan. Faulkner's actions this week speak volumes. They confirm that the Labor Party has never opposed the

invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Since US President Barack Obama came to power, Labor has marched in lockstep with the tactical shift in US foreign policy, consisting of a more aggressive thrust into Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. Rudd increased Australia's military contribution in Afghanistan from 1,100 to 1,550, and called on NATO powers to do likewise. If Rudd is asked by Obama to send even more troops, particularly for frontline combat operations when Dutch forces leave in mid-2010, there is no doubt he will comply.

General Petraeus's nomination for an honorary Order of Australia was made by the Chief of Australia's Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston. According to press reports, it received the "imprimatur" of Prime Minister Rudd. The award to a general, who led military operations akin to those conducted by Nazi Germany in the 1930s, offers further proof of the "seamless transition" from the policies of the Coalition government. Just two years ago the same award was bestowed by Prime Minister John Howard on the man Petraeus replaced: General John Abizaid.

Faulkner's presentation to Petraeus is not only a devastating exposure of the Labor Party and its "lefts" but above all of the various pseudo "radical" organisations—including Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance and Solidarity—that insisted during the 2007 election (and still insist) that Labor was a "lesser evil" and "more responsive" to mass pressure.

In reality, Labor's role in *escalating* Australian military involvement in Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Pacific, flows from the ALP's history of functioning as the party of war and militarism throughout the twentieth century. It was Labor which forged the close relationship with US imperialism in 1941 in the midst of World War II, and Labor remains one of its most vital props.

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