

Australian Labor government whitewashes the Vietnam war

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The 50th anniversary of Australia's withdrawal from Vietnam has been used by sections of the political and media establishment to try and rehabilitate that imperialist war, predatory in its aims and criminal in its execution.

The federal Labor government is at the forefront of these reactionary efforts. Its attempts to whitewash Australia's role in one of the most horrific wars of the 20th century are inextricably tied to Labor's complete commitment to US-led plans for even more catastrophic conflicts against Russia and above all China.

Various events are being held throughout the year to "commemorate" the anniversary of the withdrawal. However, the centerpiece was Vietnam Veterans' Day on August 18.

Memorial services and commemorations were held in a number of towns and cities. At one in Ipswich, Queensland, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese delivered an extended apology to the veterans of the war.

Albanese declared that after the conflict "We should have acknowledged you better as a nation then. But the truth is, as a nation we didn't."

He proclaimed that Australian soldiers in Vietnam had "upheld Australia's name. You showed the Australian character at its finest. You deserved so very much better than you received." Albanese concluded: "Let us say to every one of our Vietnam veterans, today and every day, we honour you, we thank you and we are sorry that as a nation, it took us so long for us as a nation to do so."

The framing was cynical in the extreme. While couched as an acknowledgement of the difficulties faced by veterans, Albanese did not specify the wrongs purportedly done to Vietnam veterans. That many of them suffer post-traumatic stress disorder and other hardships is undeniable. But that is a consequence of the war and the responsibility of the governments that prosecuted it.

For years, right-wingers have claimed that veterans of the conflict were spat at, insulted and set-upon when they returned. Those assertions have long since been exposed as gross exaggerations of what were, at most, a handful of incidents.

It is the case that in the decades following the war, the Returned Services League, the military and governments did not feature their exploits in Vietnam. That was a recognition of mass hostility to the war, which resulted in some of the largest demonstrations in Australia's history, and the fact that it was correctly viewed as a dirty and criminal enterprise.

Now, 50 years on, Albanese's remarks were unmistakably aimed at developing a new narrative of the conflict. Instead of a neo-colonial war, characterised by the mass killing of civilians, carpet bombings and other atrocities, as it has widely been viewed, the war was an

exercise in "courage," "service" and the defence of the nation.

In reality, the war was the bloodiest manifestation of American imperialism's attempt to secure its global hegemony in the decades after World War II. In the context of the Cold War, this included a string of coups, brutal wars and counter-insurgency operations against liberation and independence movements in the historically oppressed countries, from Korea, to Vietnam, Central and South America.

Beginning in the 1950s and accelerating in the early 60s, the US had intervened in Vietnam, backing a widely reviled puppet regime in the south of the country, and deploying thousands of "military advisors" against the National Liberation Front (NLF), centred in the north.

As it became clear that the NLF was making advances, the Democrat administration of US President Lyndon Johnson prepared a massive expansion of direct US intervention. To justify the campaign of bombings and direct deployment of troops, Johnson and the US military concocted the Gulf of Tonkin incident. They claimed that a US warship had come under fire from North Vietnamese forces in August, 1964. In fact, the incident was a complete fabrication.

The conservative Australian government of Prime Minister Robert Menzies fully backed the provocation and the ensuing escalation. His government had first sent "military advisors" to participate in the conflict in 1962.

In the immediate wake of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the Menzies government would introduce selective conscription for 20-year-olds in December 1964. The move was absurdly packaged as a means of ensuring that the Australian mainland could be defended from a potential northern invasion.

The same year, Menzies offered to dispatch ground troops to the conflict. That move was taken in May 1965, with the deployment of infantry, armored carrier personnel, signals and logistics troops. Menzies had falsely claimed in parliament to have received a request for troop assistance from the South Vietnamese puppet government. No such request had been sent, and the deployment had been worked out behind closed doors with the US.

Over the ensuing seven years, Australian troops would participate in the brutal counter-insurgency war, which inevitably acquired the character of a war against the entire population. At the peak of Australian involvement, more than 7,500 Australian soldiers were deployed.

As with the US and its other allies participating in the conflict, Australian troops carried out major war crimes.

The official 2020 Brereton Report into Australian war crimes decades later in Afghanistan, was compelled to review some of the alleged atrocities in Vietnam. It noted that the practice of throwdowns—placing guns on the bodies of murdered civilians—used

by Australian special forces in Afghanistan had originated during the Vietnam war.

The report cited one study, which indicated that “there were Australians whose morality was so eroded that they murdered villagers, raped women, tortured and killed wounded enemy soldiers and mutilated corpses.”

Other accounts recalled instances where unarmed women and children were shot dead. They, together with their families, were regarded as “enemy” forces because they sought cover whenever a US warplane flew overhead. There were allegations of mass murder, paralleling the 1968 My Lai massacre where US forces massacred as many as 500 defenseless villagers.

The war would serve as a model for future counter-insurgency operations.

That Albanese and the Labor government are seeking to rehabilitate the war is a stark warning of what is being prepared. Labor has completed Australia’s transformation into a frontline state in the US-led war drive against China. The entire country is being militarised and placed on a war footing, with ever greater integration into the US war machine and the development of advanced strike capabilities. A US war with China would inevitably entail mass death and crimes on a vast scale.

Labor’s central role in these war preparations is in line with its historical character as a pro-capitalist party of Australian imperialism.

Fifty years on, an enduring myth is that the Australian withdrawal expressed an anti-war tradition within the Labor Party. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, by the time the newly-elected Labor government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam proclaimed Australian preparations for withdrawal in December 1972, most Australian troops had already been recalled by its conservative predecessor.

That was a response to the military victories of the NLF, which demonstrated that any prospect of a US sweep of the country was all but foreclosed. At the time, the US was involved in the so-called Paris Peace Accords, along with South and North Vietnamese representatives, to try and orchestrate an end to the conflict short of a catastrophic defeat.

In addition to the military realities, the turn towards withdrawal was bound up with fear over massive anti-war sentiment. While the earliest marches against the war, in the mid-60s had been poorly attended, by 1970 moratorium marches were attracting more than 100,000 people in the major cities. The great fear of the ruling elite, including Labor, was that the anti-war movement would intersect with a developing movement of the working class.

That fear had been expressed repeatedly in the 1960s by then Labor leader Arthur Calwell. He had warned against the introduction of conscription, from the standpoint that it could provoke major social and political unrest. A decades-long servant of the ruling elite, Calwell recalled the mass anti-conscription movement that had erupted in World War I, provoking a split within the Labor Party.

Calwell was anything but a principled opponent of the war. He would denounce it as a “dirty, rotten, unwinnable war.” The clear import of the latter phrase was that the US was making a strategic miscalculation, but that if the war were “winnable,” it would have received Calwell’s open support. At the same time, he continued to fully support the US-Australia military alliance.

Calwell would pledge to withdraw Australian conscripts from the conflict if Labor were elected, but generally remained vague on what it would do with regular troops deployed to Vietnam. Calwell, in the lead-up to the 1966 election, would later state that any withdrawal of

regular soldiers would be carried out in consultation with the US.

In the same election, Whitlam, then a prominent member of the party and later prime minister, floated the possibility of an increase of regular Australian troop numbers if Labor were elected. His comments were not an aberration. Shortly before the election, three Labor MPs had toured Vietnam, visiting US and Australian commands and greeting the troops.

Labor’s complicity in the war extended to the “lefts.” One of the leading “lefts,” Jim Cairns was chair of Labor’s Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee when it issued a February 1965 statement backing US strikes against North Vietnam. Cairns, and the Labor leadership as a whole, had promoted the fraudulent Gulf of Tonkin incident alongside the US.

When Whitlam became Labor leader in February, 1967, he and Cairns developed something of a division of labour. Whitlam, from the right, would say little to nothing about the war, while tacitly supporting it. Cairns would issue mealy-mouthed condemnations of the conflict and would appear at the various anti-war demonstrations.

The real lesson of that experience is not that Labor can be pressured to adopt an anti-war position, but that it is a dead-end for such sentiments among workers and young people. The Stalinist Communist Party of Australia, together with the trade union leaderships and various middle-class organisations, worked might and main to subordinate the anti-war movement to Labor and calls for “negotiation.”

The consequence was that Australian involvement in the war continued for years. At the same time, the largely middle-class anti-war movement was cut off from the genuine revolutionary force in society, the working class, which was then on the move.

Decades on, and Labor has moved far to the right, even compared with its rotten record on Vietnam. Now, the “lefts,” such as they are, are in power, represented not only by Albanese but by figures such as Foreign Minister Penny Wong. With no connection to the working class whatsoever, and functioning openly as the representatives of big business and imperialism, they are preparing even more horrific crimes.

The alternative is the fight to build a genuine anti-war movement. Such a movement must be international in scope, based upon the great social and political strength of the working class, and independent of all the parties of the political establishment. Above all, it must adopt a socialist program directed against the source of conflict, the capitalist system itself.



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