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ANDREW GILIGAN ESSAY

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In show biz they say you should never work with children or animals. In politics, may be the rule should be never work with children, animals or dossiers.

On Iraq, Tony Blair has issued three and they've all been questioned. The one on Saddam's security apparatus, famously largely copied of the internet. The one criticising Iraq's human rights record, which achieved the unusual feat for something on that subject of being attacked by Amnesty International. But it's the first, and the most substantial of the dossiers that's now, potentially, the most troublesome

The first mention of it was on the 25th February 2002. A BBC poll had shown that 86 out of 100 Labour backbenchers didn't think there was enough evidence of the threat posed by Saddam. The dossier would, it was promised, provide that evidence. It was written during March; publication was promised for the end of the month but was shelved. The Government said it didn't want to alarm people. The papers said that it was because the dossier wasn't alarming enough. The BBC's intelligence and technical sources agreed. They told us that it didn't add much to what any well-informed layman already knew.

'What you have to understand is that 10 to 15 years ago, there was a lot of information. With a concealment and deception operation by the Iraqis, there's far less material.'

Other media heard the same. On August 29th, senior Whitehall sources told Michael Evans, Defence Editor of The Times, that the dossier was 'not revelatory'. On September 2nd, a Whitehall source told Richard Norton-Taylor, Security Editor of the Guardian: 'The dossier will no longer play a role. There's very little new to put in it.'

The very next morning, however, Mr Blair announced that the dossier would after all be published, and it was, on September 24th. By that day, the dossier, described as unrevelatory only 4 weeks before, had suddenly become very revelatory indeed. A senior figure involved in compiling it, told this programme two days ago that Downing Street had applied pressure to make it sexier. This quote from a British official appeared in yesterday's Washington Post:

'They were pressured and super-heated debates between Downing Street officials and intelligence officials over the contents of the dossier.'

The Prime Minister and his staff have spent the last two days denying claims that nobody has actually ever made, such as that material from the dossier was invented; that it came from sources other than the intelligence agencies; and that Downing Street wrote the dossier. They have, however, failed to deny several of the claims which the

BBC source did make. There's been no denial of his allegation that the dossier was re-written the week before publication, nor has there been any denial that the line about Iraq's 45 minute deployment of biological weapons was added to the dossier at a late stage. When we put both these questions to Downing Street, they replied that they refused to discuss processology.

On both sides of the Atlantic, relations between intelligence professionals and their political masters are at a low ebb. In Washington, retired spies have written to President Bush saying the American public was misled. In Britain we've now seen two unprecedented intelligence leaks, directly challenging the Prime Minister. Time, perhaps, to take stock.

END OF RECORDING