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HEADLINE: I asked my intelligence source why Blair misled us all over Saddam's weapons. His reply? One word .. CAMPBELL

BYLINE: Andrew Gilligan

THE location was a central London hotel and the source was waiting as I got there. We'd both been too busy to meet for nearly a year, but there was no sign this would be anything more than a routine get-together.

We started off by moaning about the railways. Only after about half an-hour did the story emerge that would dominate the headlines for 48 hours, ruin Tony Blair's Basra awayday and work the Prime Minister into a state of controlled fury.

The source agreed with Blair about one thing. He, too, was adamant that Iraq had had a Weapons of Mass Destruction programme in the recent past. He pointed out some telltale signs that the chief UN weapons inspector, Hans Blix, seemed to have missed. But he knew, better than anyone, that it didn't amount to the 'imminent threat' touted by Ministers. And he was gently despairing about the way No 10 had spoiled its case by exaggeration. 'Typical Downing Street,' he said, half smiling, half annoyed.

We'd discussed the famous Blair dossier on Iraq's weapons at our previous meeting, a few months before it was published last September. 'It's really not very exciting, you know,' he'd told me. So what, I asked him now, had changed?

'Nothing changed,' he said. 'Until the week before, it was just like I told you. It was transformed the week before publication, to make it sexier.'

What do you mean? Can I take notes? 'The classic,' he said 'was the statement that WMD were ready for use in 45 minutes. One source said it took 45 minutes to launch a missile and that was misinterpreted to mean that WMD could be deployed in 45 minutes. There was no evidence that they had loaded conventional missiles with WMD, or could do so anything like that quickly.' I asked him how this transformation happened. The answer was a single word.

'Campbell.' What? Campbell made it up? 'No, it was real information. But it was included against our wishes because it wasn't reliable.' ANOTHER saucepan had been thrown in what looks like the increasingly troubled marriage between Downing Street and the secret world. Last week's was only the most recent in an unprecedented series of intelligence leaks directly challenging the Prime Minister. After the teachers and the firemen, the spooks have become the latest group of public sector workers with a grudge against New Labour.

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Politicians love intelligence. Knowledge is power, and secret knowledge makes them feel even more powerful. It can be ideal for publicity purposes, too. Describing some claim as the product of secret intelligence gives it authority, while also providing the perfect reason to block further enquiries on the claim's exact origins.

But Ministers have obligations to the security services, too. Though sometimes players of the spin game themselves, the spies see their work as objective - and, of course, secret.

'We take pride in our independence,' said one official of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the co-ordinating body for British intelligence 'And we are unhappy to see our work being quoted in public.' Traditionally, they've kept that unhappiness to themselves. But over Iraq, something snapped.

In February, the intelligence services made clear their anger at claims by Mr Blair linking Saddam with Al Qaeda. Several reporters with intelligence contacts were encouraged to write that there was no evidence of a current link, and that the services were unhappy at the PM's attempt to make one.

Then came the extraordinary leak - to my radio programme - of a top-secret document from the Defence Intelligence Staff, explicitly dismissing the Osama-Saddam connection. I have never before received such a highly classified document. It achieved the desired result: It shut the PM up on the subject.

When it came to the second dossier on Saddam's security apparatus, this January, Downing Street doesn't even seem to have troubled the intelligence services too much. Despite describing it as based on 'current intelligence', the author turned out to have copied great chunks straight off the Internet, like some GCSE student overdue with his coursework essay. The final version was not shown to the Joint Intelligence Committee. They were furious about that, too.

In America, as well, dissent is rising. A group of retired spies last week wrote to President Bush saying: 'There is one unpardonable sin Cooking intelligence to the recipe of high policy. There is ample evidence that this has been done in Iraq.' One member of the Pentagon's Defence Intelligence Agency was just as blunt: 'The American were manipulated,' he told The New York Times.

Intelligence today is mostly analysis, and the people who sift the data from phone-taps, spy satellites, defectors and agents know full well that it's an art, not a science.

Occasionally some wonderful information will be produced. During the first Gulf War, the American National Security Agency managed to tap Saddam Hussein's phone calls to his UN ambassador. But you might be surprised at how few spies, agents or other resources we had in Iraq under Saddam, and how very little we knew about day-to-day events there.

YOU have to beware, also, of the motives and agendas of your informants.

Many of the Bush White House's favourite 'facts' on Saddam's WMD turn out to have come from

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Ahmed Chalabi, the would-be future ruler of Iraq and a figure with an obvious interest in welcoming regime change.

The language of intelligence is inconclusive. The language of spin admits much less doubt. The Government thinks we need an easy headline - Saddam's nuclear bomb, Saddam's 45-minute warning. I'm not so sure we're that stupid.

The Prime Minister and his staff have spent the past few days denying claims that no one has ever actually made - that material in the dossier was invented; that it came from nonintelligence sources, and so on

They have, however, noticeably failed to deny several of the claims which the BBC's source did make. There's been no denial of his allegation that the dossier was rewritten the week before publication. Nor has there been any denial that the line about the 45-minute deployment of weapons was inserted at a late stage. When we put both questions to Downing Street, they refused to discuss 'processology'.

We'll never know the process inside Downing Street whereby a dossier described by a Whitehall source on August 29, 2002, as 'not revelatory', by publication day - September 24, 2002 - became very revelatory indeed.

The spooks may have been too ready to give way to the spinners. But if things had been left entirely to the intelligence professionals, it seems clear that the dossier would have been much less bold and assertive than the one that was published.

Now there is a new claim that the Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and his US counterpart, Colin Powell, admitted to each other the fragility of their intelligence - even as they were about to present it as grounds for war.

The Foreign Office denies their meeting took place as reported.

Some say none of this is important. All that matters is that a tyrant was toppled, a people were freed. But the dossier saga touches on an even more important goal than the freeing of oppressed foreign peoples. That is, that your words should be credible, and your own people should be told the truth.

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