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BODY:

Tony Blair and George Bush are encountering an unexpected obstacle in their campaign for war against Iraq - their own intelligence agencies.

Britain and America's spies believe that they are being politicised: that the intelligence they provide is being selectively applied to lead to the opposite conclusion from the one they have drawn, which is that Iraq is much less of a threat than their political masters claim.

Worse, when the intelligence agencies fail to do the job, the politicians will not stop at plagiarism to make their case, even "tweaking" the plagiarised material to ensure a better fit.

"You cannot just cherry-pick evidence that suits your case and ignore the rest. It is a cardinal rule of intelligence," said one aggrieved officer. "Yet that is what the PM is doing." Not since Harold Wilson has a Prime Minister been so unpopular with his top spies. The mounting tension is mirrored in Washington.

"We've gone from a zero position, where presidents refused to cite detailed intel as a source, to the point now where partisan material is being officially attributed to these agencies," said one US intelligence source.

Mr Blair is facing an unprecedented, if covert, rebellion by his top spies, who last week used the politicians' own weapon - the strategic leak - against him. The BBC received a Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS) document which showed that British intelligence believes there are no current links between the Iraqi regime and the al Qaeda network. The classified document, written last month, said there had been contact between the two in the past, but it assessed that any fledgling relationship foundered due to mistrust and incompatible ideologies.

That conclusion contradicted one of the main charges laid against Saddam Hussein by the United States and Britain, most notably in Wednesday's speech by the Secretary of State, Colin Powell, to the UN Security Council - that he has cultivated contacts with the group blamed for the September 11 attacks.

Such a leak of up-to-date and sensitive material reveals the depth of anger within Britain's spy community over the misuse of intelligence by Downing Street.

"A DIS document like this is highly secret. Whoever leaked it must have been quite senior and had unofficial approval from within the highest levels of British intelligence," said one insider.

In response the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, tried to play down the importance of the DIS, which he repeatedly called the Defence Intelligence Services. No sooner had that embarrassment passed, however, than it emerged that large chunks of the Government's

latest **dossier** on Iraq, which claimed to draw on "intelligence material", were taken from published academic articles, some of them several years old.

It was this recycled material that Mr Powell held up in front of a worldwide television audience, saying: "I would call my colleagues' attention to the fine paper that the United Kingdom distributed ... which describes in exquisite detail Iraqi deception activities."

Now Glen Rangwala, the Cambridge University analyst who blew the whistle on the original plagiarism, has pointed out the deception did not end there. He showed that the young Downing Street team, led by Alison Blackshaw, Alastair Campbell's personal assistant, which put the document together had "hardened" the language in several places.

How selectively the work of the intelligence agencies is being used on both sides of the Atlantic is shown by a revealing clash between Senator Bob Graham and the Bush administration's top intelligence advisers. Mr Graham, a Democrat, is chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee. Last July, baffled by the apparently contradictory assessments on Iraq by America's 13 different intelligence agencies, he asked for a report to be drawn up by the CIA that estimated the likelihood of Saddam Hussein using weapons of mass destruction.

The CIA procrastinated, but finally produced a report after Senator Graham threatened to accuse them of obstruction. The conclusions were so significant that he immediately asked for it to be declassified. The CIA concluded that the likelihood of Saddam Hussein using such weapons was "very low" for the "foreseeable future". The only circumstances in which Iraq would be more likely to use chemical weapons or encourage terrorist attacks would be if it was attacked.

After more arguments the CIA partly declassified the report. Senator Graham noted that the parts released were those that made the case for war with Iraq. Those that did not were withheld. He appealed, and the extra material was eventually released.

Yet the report has largely been ignored by the US media. Last week Colin Powell made much of the presence in Iraq of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the man he identified as running an al Qaeda network from Baghdad. He drew on information from al-Zarqawi's captured deputy, but made no mention of another explosive allegation from the same detainee: that Osama bin Laden's organisation received passports and NZ\$1.8m in cash from a member of the royal family in Qatar.

It is well known in US intelligence circles that the CIA director, George Tenet, is angry with the Qatari government's failure to take action. But the Gulf state would be the main US air operations base in any war on Iraq, and Washington does not want to air the inconvenient facts in public.

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