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SUNDAY TELEGRAPH(LONDON)

February 09, 2003, Sunday

SECTION: Pg. 20

LENGTH: 1797 words

HEADLINE: How not to win a propaganda war Britain and the US last week launched a joint publicity offensive to build momentum toward war with Iraq. But, as COLIN BROWN and JULIAN COMAN report, Blair's plagiarised dossier has shot the PM in the foot

BYLINE: By COLIN BROWN AND JULIAN COMAN

BODY:

Tony Blair had every reason to be pleased with himself. He had just survived a gruelling 50-minute interview by the arch inquisitor Jeremy Paxman for a special edition of the BBC Newsnight programme before an audience specifically selected for its hostility to his stand against Saddam.

For once, Mr Blair felt that he had made some headway in the all-important battle for the electorate's hearts and minds. He had been tested on his reasons for supporting President George W Bush on Iraq and had succeeded in justifying his actions. He had even managed to persuade two of his harshest critics in the audience, a blonde company secretary and a Geordie, to accept his point of view.

It was during the 30-minute break before the second part of the programme, which was to focus on domestic issues, that he was told by Alastair Campbell, his head of strategy and communications, that there was a problem. Number 10 officials had released a top-secret dossier in a fanfare of publicity, claiming that it contained the latest intelligence evidence that Saddam's agents were actively intimidating the UN weapons inspectors. But the carefully orchestrated public relations exercise blew up in their faces when Channel 4 News revealed on Thursday night that the vast majority of the dossier's content had actually been lifted, word for word, from an internet article written by a PhD student in California.

It was the last thing Mr Blair wanted to hear. "His initial reaction was: 'It's unfortunate, but let's keep our eye on the big picture'," said a Whitehall official who was in the studio at the time. Mr Campbell's reaction was altogether more terse. "He said, 'Oh, f'," said the official.

For Mr Blair, the timing could not have been worse. The disclosure that a large section of the report had been copied from an article by Ibrahim al-Marashi, a 29-year-old student at Monterey Institute of International Studies in California, was a serious setback in Mr Blair's battle to convince a sceptical British public of the need to confront Saddam.

It also undermined the credibility of the meticulous case that had been put to the UN Security Council the day before by Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State. Mr Powell had praised the Downing Street document for its "exquisite detail" in his speech to the UN.

The Government's 19-page report, called "Iraq - its infrastructure of concealment, deception and intimidation", had been handed out to journalists on the Prime Minister's plane to Washington for the "council of war" with Mr Bush the previous weekend, with the implication that it was the latest intelligence. In fact, eleven pages on Saddam's repressive regime had been cobbled together in the Coalition Information Centre (CIC), a unit in the Foreign Office set up by Mr Campbell as a propaganda team for international crises. It was staffed by

young, inexperienced middle-ranking officials. The report was copied around Whitehall and the name of Alison Blackshaw, Mr Campbell's secretary, appeared on an early draft although she was not responsible for writing any part of it. But at no point had the final draft been shown to MI6 officers, in whose name the document was being presented.

"There were red faces all around," said one of Mr Campbell's aides. Mr Campbell, who had no knowledge that the document had been patched together by cut and paste techniques on the internet, also felt let down by CIC. However, in an attempt to defend the document, he told staff that the plagiarised section was "historical padding" and did not detract from the case against Saddam.

But the intelligence service, which had made a genuine contribution to the dossier, was furious. Secret service officers had been growing increasingly alarmed at the demands from Downing Street to use highly sensitive intelligence material to prove a link between Saddam and al-Qaeda that would provide the "smoking gun" for Mr Blair. They had reluctantly co-operated with part of the dossier. Now they had been made a laughing stock by the "teenage scribblers" under Mr Campbell's tutelage.

"We have been doing a lot of very good work with the intelligence service," commented one Cabinet official. "Something as amateurish as this just undermines the process. It was a stupid thing to do. There is now a lot of distancing going on from the intelligence services. They are saying it was nothing to do with them."

The row over the content of the dossier constitutes a serious setback in the carefully stage-managed international effort by the US and Britain to force Saddam to give up his weapons of mass destruction, or face the consequences. On Tuesday, Mr Blair flew for talks with President Jacques Chirac in the quaint French resort of Le Touquet at which Mr Blair urged the French president - over a lunch of scallops, lamb and chocolate creme brulee at the Hotel Westminster - not to veto the vital second UN resolution for military action. Mr Blair had travelled with Cabinet colleagues Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary, David Blunkett, the Home Secretary, and Charles Clarke, the Education Secretary. As they flew back on board a BAe 125 jet from the Queen's Flight, Mr Straw's officials were already bound for New York for an altogether more compelling event, the dramatic presentation by Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State to the UN of damning intelligence evidence of Saddam's deception of the UN weapons inspectors.

Mr Powell had prepared for the biggest speech of his life encamped in the Langley CIA headquarters in Virginia. Last weekend, he made the short trip each evening from his home in McLean to review slides, transcripts and satellite photographs with CIA officials. Cups of coffee were consumed late into the evening as Mr Powell sifted through what could and could not be used to make a case to the world that Saddam was in further material breach of UN resolution 1441.

Certain ground rules were quickly established to govern what was to be an unprecedented display of US intelligence techniques. Coded Iraqi communications intercepts would not be revealed, ruling out high-level exchanges between senior officials. "We wouldn't want the top guys to know we're listening," said a former intelligence official.

Human intelligence would be used sparingly, to protect sources and agents still in Iraq. "Powell didn't get into the really sensitive stuff we were worried about releasing," said another intelligence officer.

Measurement and signature intelligence, which uses highly technical sensors to trace evidence of banned weapons, was also omitted from the final draft. Both Powell and CIA advisers thought that the evidence provided by hand-held sensors, spy satellites and

specially equipped aircraft would be too obscure and technically demanding. This was a public presentation designed to be damning but accessible to ordinary Americans as well as UN envoys.

Despite the restrictions, by Monday Mr Powell was happy that he had a powerful case to make. To test it out, he gave a preview at a Pentagon lunch held by Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defence. The audience was comprised of some of the most powerful figures in Washington politics over the past thirty years. Alongside Condoleeza Rice, the National Security Adviser, and John McLaughlin, the deputy director of the CIA, were former secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and Madeleine Albright, former defence secretaries, Robert McNamara and Frank Carlucci, former national security advisers Zbigniew Brzezinski and William Clark and the former CIA director William Webster.

No one around the table had ever shared intelligence on a scale as vast as this. In the words of one State Department official, using a baseball analogy: "We decided to hit a series of line drives, rather than go for a big out-of-the-park home run."

For 78 minutes Mr Powell laid out the case that "Iraq has put itself in deeper material breach". Jack Straw listened and nodded. Mohamed Douri, Iraq's ambassador to the UN, alternately glared or affected indifference. Dominique de Villepin, the French foreign minister, leaned forward with particular attention when Mr Powell's slides were produced.

Joschka Fischer, the German foreign minister and chairman of the UN Security Council meeting, drummed his fingers on the table, cleaned his glasses and occasionally chatted with aides. At one point, after Mr Powell had finished his address, Mr Fischer insisted that a large screen heading - "Iraq, Failing to Disarm", be removed.

Allotted seven minutes to respond to Mr Powell's case that inspections in Iraq were being foiled, Mr de Villepin called for the number of inspectors to be doubled, or even tripled. The Russian foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, echoed the sentiment.

The decisive battle for opinion at the Security Council was just beginning, and Mr Powell took Mr de Villepin on.

"What exactly do you want to do about Iraq?" he asked. As diplomats and envoys suddenly fell silent, Mr de Villepin replied that war was not something that could be launched "because of suspicions". He added that, in general, war failed to bring anything good in its wake and that a war against Iraq would merely resolve other countries to obtain their own weapons of mass destruction.

This weekend, Mr Blair and Mr Bush are working to persuade the sceptics in the permanent group of five in the security council - France, Russia and China - not to veto a second resolution. It is more important for Mr Blair than Mr Bush, who has made it clear that America is ready to act without the figleaf of a second resolution.

Mr Blair knows that without it, his party will be split from top to bottom. Geoff Hoon, the Defence Secretary, was mauled by Left-wingers on Thursday when he announced that a third of the RAF would be deploying to the Gulf. Mr Hoon added that there would be no Commons vote before the bombing started. "No annihilation without representation," shouted Alan Simpson, a member of Labour's awkward squad.

Other Labour MPs were more direct. "If Blair goes to war without a second resolution, it's 'Bye-Bye Tony'," said one MP. Ian Gibson, the Labour MP for Norwich North, said: "Tony Blair was elected saying he had 24 hours to save the NHS. He's got 72 hours to save his job."

Labour party officials said a "huge" number of resolutions from Labour constituencies have been sent in protesting against the war. One constituency said it is stopping campaigning for the local council elections in protest. Next Sunday, Mr Blair will confront them at Labour's spring conference in Glasgow, 24 hours after the mass "stop the war" rallies in London and Glasgow are due to be held. He has made it clear to his senior staff, he can afford no more mistakes. [PS]News: [ES]

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