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Inside Washington

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Elites on the Cheap

The Chinatown bus has long been the preferred transport of Asian immigrants, students, and low-budget tourists traveling the Northeast Corridor. Now add well-heeled lobbyists, Hill staffers, and government officials to that list. The buses are dependably slow, crowded, and often hazardously operated.

Sean Crowley, a lawyer at the Commerce Department, rides the bus about twice a month for business and family visits. The trip from Washington to New York City takes him five hours--sometimes longer. But with a mortgage and other bills, he can't afford Amtrak, which costs \$72 or \$103 one-way, depending on the time of day. The bus ranges from \$30 to \$35 round-trip.

Matt Adkins with the Homeland Security Department rides the Chinatown bus regularly to Philadelphia and is "thinking about a New York City trip this fall." Time magazine reporter Sarah Lynch describes the experience this way: "The seats hurt your neck. There's no leg room. And they drive like maniacs." Why go through the hassle? "It's cheaper," she said. --**Eugene Mulero**

Murmurs

Psst! Will **Vice President Cheney** be a no-show at the Republican National Convention? Two K Street allies of Sen. **John McCain**, the presumptive nominee, say they've heard that the veep, who has notched astonishingly low approval ratings, has decided to sit this one out. One McCain ally quipped that if Cheney doesn't have a cameo role, it would be "unprecedented," adding that "even Dan Quayle got to speak in '96 as a former veep." A spokesperson for Cheney responded that, at this point, "we don't have anything to announce" ... You've heard the grumbling about accommodations in Denver for the Democratic Convention next month, but you won't hear any carping from Ohio Democratic Party Chairman **Chris Redfern**. Coming from a battleground state has definite advantages. "It's hell being from Ohio," Redfern said with a chuckle, as he noted that Buckeye State delegates are booked into a hotel "within walking distance" of the convention hall. "The poor Delaware people are 59 minutes from downtown Denver," he said. He had just come from some pre-convention meetings in Denver, Redfern added, and "the only thing lacking from my room was a cold bottle of champagne and a foot rub" ...

Vital Statistics

77, 52Degrees temperature and percent humidity on Nantucket July 10, 2008 --**Weather.com****\$276**

One-way airfare from Reagan Washington National Airport to Nantucket --**CheapTickets.com**

Say What?

Did you know that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was a Republican? Neither did we. The National Black Republican Association is continuing a billboard campaign in Florida claiming that the iconic civil-rights leader was a member of the GOP. "It's past time that we set the record straight," said Frances Rice, the NBRA chairman. The King Center in Atlanta strongly begs to differ. "There is absolutely no confirmation that he was a Republican," said Steve Klein, communications director for the center. "He was never a member of any political party--and never formally endorsed any candidates." A 2006 radio campaign in Maryland by Rice's organization also claiming MLK as a Republican drew catcalls from Democrats and condemnation from GOP Senate candidate Michael Steele, whom it was meant to help.

--**Randy Barrett**

What Ever Happened to ... Bill Cohen?

Not satisfied with shattering the myth that there are no second acts in American lives, former Defense Secretary and Republican Sen. William Cohen is well into Acts 3, 4, and 5 as a successful businessman (head of the Cohen Group lobbying and consulting firm); best-selling author (see *Love in Black and White*, co-authored with his African-American wife, Janet Langhart); and public-policy wonk (trustee at the Center for Strategic and International Studies).

Yet trying to extricate Washington from paralyzing partisanship is what energizes Cohen the most. Along with former Democratic Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia, he has started the Nunn-Cohen Dialogues in an attempt to find middle-ground solutions for the problems that ail American society. "When I was growing up as a young boy, you rarely saw senators retire, because it was considered the best job in the world other than president," Cohen said.

"The year I left, in 1996, 13 senators voluntarily retired, and a consistent reason was that our political system had skewed to the poles and become dysfunctional and partisan. On all the major issues that confront us--a declining dollar, rising deficits, a lack of health care--both parties are still more interested in going at each other like the Hatfields and McCoys rather than finding solutions. As someone with 30 years of public service, I couldn't just sit on the sidelines and watch as the world continues to lose confidence in the United States." --James Kitfield

Q&A with David Bositis

Senior political analyst, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

NJ: Do you buy the notion that voters lie to pollsters when an African-American is on the ballot?

Bositis: For the most part these days, I would say no. There may be some small percentage of white voters who might be concerned about appearing racist if they suggested in clearer terms that they wouldn't support an African-American, but for the most part, no.

NJ: But in the past has there been something to this notion?

Bositis: Yes. The first time pollsters really noticed it was the Tom Bradley [California gubernatorial] race in 1982. The polling suggested that Bradley was going to do much better than he actually did.... Then it happened in the Doug Wilder [Virginia gubernatorial] race in 1989. Wilder won that race, but pre-election polls suggested he was going to win by a lot larger margin.

NJ: So, do the improved polling results reflect more-sophisticated polling techniques, or changes in population?

Bositis: It's mainly changes in the population. The country is quite different from what it was even 15 or 20 years ago. I fully expect that in the not-too-distant future, this is going to be a historical artifact. When people talk about it, they will

say, "Well, back in the old days we had some polls that came out this way." But in terms of the future ... it's something that will disappear. --**Kirk Victor**

Mr. Fix-It

New Secretary Steve Preston is working overtime to restore morale at the Housing and Urban Development Department in the wake of the contracting scandal that forced out his predecessor, Alphonso Jackson. Last month, Preston met with 50 officials and staffers to discuss his 200-day plan for the troubled department. Dubbed "Impact 200"--a recognition that he won't be around very long, with the Bush administration winding down--Preston's plan focuses on aiding homeowners in the mortgage crisis and providing more affordable housing. He also wants to improve the procurement system. "Some career HUD people thought he was a caretaker," one official says, "but this SOB is sprinting to the finish line." Another added, "He was rallying the troops. The scandal took its toll around here--a lot of people were just worn out." Preston, a former head of the Small Business Administration, is also winning plaudits for, of all things, eating lunch in the cafeteria with employees. "People notice things like that," another insider says. --**Edward T. Pound**

Bon Voyage

Africa is the Big Tent, judging from the surrogates for the 2008 presidential contest who will bunk together as allies next week in Rwanda's Kigali Serena Hotel. One Vote '08, an umbrella grassroots group that keeps world leaders focused on global poverty and disease, is flying a delegation to Africa July 17-23 to highlight U.S.-supported successes that should continue under the next president. Putting their Obama-McCain commitments on mute for the week will be Tom Daschle and Bill Frist, the group's Senate-seasoned co-chairs; Cindy McCain and GOPers Mike Huckabee, John Kasich, plus former Bush 43 speechwriter Michael Gerson; and in the Democratic camp, former White House Chiefs of Staff Leon Panetta and John Podesta. Daschle, Podesta, and Panetta will probably find time to chat in private about Obama transition issues, but Podesta said his lips are sealed except to talk about Rwanda, poverty, and HIV/AIDS: "This is one of the few issues, in one of the few places, where both parties can find common ground." --**Alexis Simendinger**

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