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My [quick!] trip inside Clinton's New York City campaign office

By ALLAN BONNER

NEW YORK CITY—One of the "bibles" that young political operatives and journalists read is a study of how reporters cover an election campaign. Timothy Crouse's book is now out of date, if only because of its title, *The Boys on the Bus*. But referring to reporters as "boys" lasted at least until the Mulroney years in Canada, when the PM would turn to his press secretary, Michel Gratton and ask, "So, what are the boys saying?"—also the title of a book by Gratton.

But Crouse's book is still relevant for one of its memorable phrases that still applies in today's campaigns—"a well-run bus is a well run country." He's referring to the campaign bus (or plane), on which reporters judge how suitable a candidate is for high office, in great part on whether the candidate has a well-run campaign bus.

Silly? Superficial? I thought so until I visited Herbert Gans at Columbia University many years ago. He wrote *Deciding What's News*—a major study of how journalists work. Gans set me straight. He asked what other criteria journalists have to make a decision about how good a candidate will be in office. The bus is what they see (along with the same speech twice a day). Plus, Gans pointed out, if you can't run a bus how on earth are you going to run the country? His point was that if you can't attract a group of young, keen kids to make sure breakfast is served, the bus leaves on time, all the luggage is aboard, lunch is at noon, crowds are in place, signs held high and so on, who is going to help you run the high office you attain?

With my head full of Gans and Crouse, I went to the heart of the biggest campaign, in the biggest city, in the most powerful democracy the world has ever seen. Suite 3030, 420 Lexington Avenue, just North of 42nd Street, New York, New York is the campaign office of Hillary Clinton for President of the United States of America.

The guard on the ground floor accepts my business card as ID and lets me go right up. Wandering the halls of the top floor, I find a cardboard sign indicating that Hillary might be inside. She isn't, but there is a young man eating takeout food in a small meeting room just off the empty reception area. After a few minutes of my standing there, he says, "Hi" and goes on eating.

Behind the empty reception desk are stacks of what look like fundraising letters and a couple of staffers focused on these and other documents. After glancing at me, they go on with their business too. Finally, a young woman enters the office from the same hallway I came from. As I turn around to see her, she asks, "Is someone helping you?"

"No," I say, and ask for a brochure, bio, speech, backgrounder or any other readily available campaign material.

Abruptly, the woman says she has no campaign materials and refers me to the web. I ask what she might give to a voter who might walk in.

"Maybe a bumper sticker," the staffer offers without smiling. I ask her to check on what she has and she comes back with the website address (www.HillaryClinton.com) and phone number (202-263-0194), written on a green sticky note.

It is obvious that the woman does not want to speak with me, but just repeatedly refers me to the web. I try one more

time by asking her to verify that they have absolutely no campaign materials in the campaign office. Finally, the woman says (borderline rudely) that it's her first day on the job and is not sure. I ask her to check with a colleague.

Hillary's representative went to the back of the suite of offices and soon there emerged a young man with much the same message. He kept up the woman's line of questioning for me—"What is it you want?" I kept replying that I would take whatever I could get. The young man kindly says he'll print out something from the web for me. I couldn't believe they didn't have a brochure printed up, so tried again to get one. I mentioned that many households might not have web-access, so surely they had something to give to a supporter.

I was told it was too soon in the campaign to have such things printed up and it was all on the web as a cost-saving measure and to ensure people could get-up-to-date information, not a stale printed piece.

The main message I got was that it was time to leave, since there was no material or information for me in the campaign office.

You'd think with U.S. \$25-million and lots more money to come, the Clinton campaign could afford what's called a "personal piece" of generic literature on the candidate. You'd think the kids in the campaign would be excited enough to have a visitor to an empty campaign office to chat me up. You'd think that they suspect that I could be a voter or big-time donor standing there, or an influential journalist once I'd introduced myself.

But, no, they were involved in other important matters, I guess.

Campaigns are often won on the margins. It's the extra effort on the phone banks, lawn-sign campaign and with journalists that can make the difference.

I worked on one campaign years ago that we narrowly lost because we couldn't get lawn signs up until half-way through the election. When cleaning out the constituency office after our loss, I noticed hundreds of old lawn signs from the previous election. Surely it would have made a difference if our guy in charge of signs had just put up the old ones until the new order arrived.

In another election, a woman walked into the brand new campaign office and started looking around. Our receptionist talked her up about the virtues of the candidate. She admitted she'd just been looking around to rent a space for a kid's gym class. But she was so impressed with the pitch she'd received that she volunteered to be one of the best fundraisers anyone had ever seen.

Politics is a game of inches. Hillary looked miles ahead until recently when her speeches were a little flat and opponent Barack Obama proved he could raise lots of money too.

Hillary's workers need every walk-in supporter they can get.

Enough said, except I never did get a bumper sticker.

Dr. Allan Bonner has consulted to eight heads of government, 12 party leaders, 36 Cabinet ministers and hundreds of diplomats and senior military officers on five continents. His latest book is Political Columns—Behind the Scenes With Powerful People.

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