

The Democratic presidential candidates: A socialist appraisal

Pete Buttigieg: The made-to-order political “outsider”

Tom Hall
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The World Socialist Web Site has begun an occasional series of articles profiling the major candidates for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in the 2020 elections. WSWs writers will examine the political history and program of each candidate, making the case for a socialist alternative for the working class to both the Democrats and the Trump administration. The first article, on Elizabeth Warren, appeared on July 11.

Over the past six months, Pete Buttigieg has emerged as a potential dark horse candidate in the Democratic Party presidential primaries. The two-term mayor of South Bend, Indiana—now referred to by the shorthand title “Mayor Pete”—has gained extensive media coverage and built a fundraising machine, raking in \$24.8 million in the second quarter of 2019, the most for any Democrat.

Buttigieg has been the most aggressive holder of high-dollar fundraisers, attending dozens of such events, particularly in California and the northeast, and raising much of his money from Silicon Valley and Wall Street.

His poll numbers have not responded in direct proportion to the build-up, however. He regularly appears in fifth place, making him the lowest in the top tier of candidates. And his campaign received a significant blow in mid-June with the killing of a black resident of South Bend by a white cop, which forced Buttigieg to leave the campaign trail briefly to deal with the crisis.

Three factors account for Buttigieg’s rise. His age, 37, is in sharp contrast to the two top candidates when he entered the race, Joe Biden, 76, and Bernie Sanders, 77, to say nothing of the geriatric leadership of the House Democrats: Nancy Pelosi, 79, Steny Hoyer, 80, and Jim Clyburn, 79. He is the only openly gay candidate among the 24 primary contestants, married to another gay man, Chasten Glezman. And most importantly—from the standpoint of his acceptability to the US ruling elite—he is a veteran of naval intelligence, having served a tour of duty in Afghanistan, where he helped identify targets for assassination squads.

These attributes—comparative youth, identity as a gay man and a background in military intelligence, together with his public embrace of religion (he is a practicing Episcopalian)—make Buttigieg something of a made-to-order candidate from the standpoint of the Democratic Party establishment. His candidacy ticks a number of boxes: anchoring the primary campaign in a right-wing national security perspective; employing youth and identity to appeal to the predominately youthful supporters of Sanders; and elevating a right-wing figure as a “next-generation” leader of the Democrats, although perhaps a more likely candidate for the vice presidency than the top job.

The American public could be forgiven for wondering why the mayor of a small Midwestern city (306th largest in the country) has suddenly appeared on their television screens in extensive and mostly favorable

news reports that paint him as a serious candidate for the Democratic nomination.

Buttigieg’s only other foray into national politics was a failed 2017 bid for chair of the Democratic National Committee (DNC), a position that attracts relatively little public attention. A poll from late March found that 62 percent of respondents did not even know who Buttigieg was, although extensive media coverage has caused that figure to fall rapidly.

In the media, Buttigieg is described as a 37-year-old “boy wonder,” an “intelligent and worldly man” who speaks seven languages, whose speeches on the campaign trail exude intelligence and thoughtfulness, a former Rhodes scholar and graduate of Harvard and Oxford, who, driven by the ideal of public service, returned to his humble Midwestern roots to become mayor of his impoverished hometown, and who single-handedly sparked a renaissance in South Bend after a half-century of urban decay.

As usual, the media depiction is largely at odds with reality.

One of the most noteworthy features of Buttigieg’s campaign so far is its political amorphousness. Even by the standards of American capitalist elections, where issues of concern to the working class are systematically excluded from the public discussion, Buttigieg has distinguished himself by his reluctance to take concrete positions on major political questions. His campaign website initially had no reference to policies, speaking only of the need to restore “values.”

As the campaign has developed, Buttigieg has taken substantive political positions that demonstrate he is a thoroughly establishment figure, aligned more with the “moderate” wing of the Democrats headed by former Vice President Joe Biden, and flatly opposed to the policies identified with Sanders. Buttigieg rejects the single-payer “Medicare for All” slogan proposed by Sanders and taken up by many other Democrats in favor of the establishment of a “public option” available on the health insurance exchanges set up under Obamacare.

One proposal that has garnered media attention is his plan to expand the Supreme Court to 15 judges, a cosmetic change that would not alter the fundamental character of the court as a bastion of political reaction. He has also called for elimination of the Electoral College, although this would require passage of a constitutional amendment, which is highly unlikely.

Voters would certainly find little in Buttigieg’s political record, consisting of a two-term stint as mayor of South Bend, to inspire enthusiasm. In the press, Buttigieg is touted as a “turnaround” mayor who has placed the ailing former factory town and site of the University of Notre Dame on the road to economic recovery.

In actual fact, his main achievements include the bulldozing of hundreds of empty homes in blighted working class neighborhoods, the sprucing up of the downtown area, and the attraction of modest investment from IT corporations, measures whose impact is not to lift working class residents

out of poverty, but rather to gentrify the city and drive up real estate values. Even a favorable review of “Mayor Pete’s” time in office by an Indiana economist was forced to admit that “other than sharing in the unemployment-rate reductions of the national economic expansion, none of the top-line economic indicators for South Bend have changed markedly over Buttigieg’s mayoral stint.”

The *New York Times* wrote in a profile: “Some of the data is dismal. Though the overall poverty rate has fallen since Mr. Buttigieg took office, poverty among African-Americans stubbornly remains almost twice as high as for African-Americans nationwide. The city has one of the highest eviction rates in the country, which has doubled under the mayor, according to the Eviction Lab at Princeton University. In households with working adults, 54 percent do not earn enough to meet a ‘survival budget,’ according to the United Way.”

A glaring spotlight was placed on the actual state of affairs in South Bend on June 16, when a white policeman shot to death a 53-year-old black man, Eric Logan. The cop, who had been previously linked to reports of brutality, was equipped with a body camera but did not turn it on when he confronted Logan in a parking lot and shot him fatally, claiming that Logan had menaced him with a knife.

Buttigieg had to leave the campaign trail and return to South Bend, appearing at town hall meetings where he and the police force were loudly denounced. While police killings are not primarily a racial issue—the largest number of those killed by police are white, and minority police shoot people just as frequently as white police—there is clearly a large element of racial injustice in South Bend. The city is 40 percent nonwhite, but under Buttigieg’s leadership the proportion of African-American police has fallen from 10 percent in 2011 to only 5 percent today. At the Democratic debate in Miami, Buttigieg claimed to have tried and failed to recruit a more diverse police force.

Given this mediocre record, what recommends “Mayor Pete” for promotion to the highest levels of the American state? Clearly, other factors are driving his buildup in the media.

Buttigieg was talent-spotted early and has moved in the top circles of the US national security establishment from the time he left college. From 2004 to 2005 (when he was 22 and 23), he worked as a conference director for the Cohen Group, a Washington-based consultancy that advises clients on international investment strategies.

The Cohen Group is headed by former Republican Senator William Cohen, who was secretary of defense under Democratic President Bill Clinton. Its principals, besides Cohen, include Marc Grossman, undersecretary of state for political affairs in the Bush administration and special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan under Obama; retired General Joseph Ralston, who concluded a 37-year Air Force career as chief of the European command and supreme allied commander, Europe; and Nicholas Burns, US ambassador to NATO and Grossman’s successor as undersecretary of state for political affairs under Bush.

This aspect of Buttigieg’s resumé closely resembles that of Barack Obama, who worked for CIA-connected Business International at age 21-22, making connections within the national security apparatus that stood him in good stead during his meteoric political rise.

From 2007 to 2010, the year before his first mayoral campaign, Buttigieg served as a consultant at McKinsey & Company, an international consulting firm with revenues of over \$10 billion.

Media comments suggest that the Democratic Party sees one of the functions of Buttigieg’s campaign as preventing Bernie Sanders from winning the nomination. An opinion piece in the *Washington Post* headlined “Buttigieg might save the Democratic Party from Sanders,” applauded Buttigieg’s public criticism of Sanders’ occasional use of the word “socialism.” Buttigieg said: “I think of myself as progressive. But I also believe in capitalism, but it has to be democratic capitalism.” The *Post* author commented: “In many ways, Buttigieg is ideally suited to take

on Sanders for the hearts, minds and political survival of the Democratic Party.”

While the Democrats know that Sanders poses no threat to American capitalism, they are determined to prevent social opposition within the working class from finding even a distorted reflection in their general election campaign, as in 2016, when the DNC attempted to sabotage Sanders’ primary campaign.

However, from the standpoint of the American ruling class, Buttigieg’s most important credential by far is his military record. Between 2009 and 2017, Buttigieg was a lieutenant and naval intelligence officer in the Naval Reserve.

According to a report in the *Hill*, “Buttigieg’s reserve training took place at Naval Station Great Lakes in North Chicago, where he studied to become an intelligence officer. There, Buttigieg’s background as a McKinsey consultant and his Rhodes scholar pedigree earned him a direct commission into the Navy.”

“We had group of young, accomplished civilians—assistant US attorneys and FBI agents,” Thomas Gary, a senior petty officer at the Great Lakes station at the time, told the *Hill*. “Pete fit right in.”

In 2014, during his first term as mayor, Buttigieg was deployed to Afghanistan, where he was a member of the Afghan Threat Finance Cell, a counter-terrorism group established in 2008 by then-commanding General David Petraeus. Through his work in this task force, Buttigieg was involved in activities that placed individuals on the US military’s “kill or capture list,” targeting these opponents of the US occupation for assassination or extraordinary rendition to a CIA black site.

Two of the seven languages in which Buttigieg claims fluency are Arabic and Dari (the Afghan dialect of Persian, spoken by about one-third of the population). Such language skills are likely the product of intensive military-intelligence training.

The presence of ex-military officers in the Democratic field is part of a larger process, the direct incorporation of military and intelligence figures into the leading personnel of the Democratic Party, a phenomenon the *World Socialist Web Site* identified among Democratic candidates for Congress in 2018 (see: The CIA Democrats).

Buttigieg is also on the board of directors of the Truman Center, an imperialist foreign policy group. Other board members include former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Leon Panetta, former CIA director and secretary of defense. The Truman Center is a veritable training center for CIA Democrats, offering workshops and messaging guidelines for up-and-coming politicians. It boasts on its website: “Our community includes more than 1,700 post-9/11 veterans, frontline civilians, policy experts, and political professionals who share a common vision of US leadership abroad.”

Buttigieg’s relative silence on foreign policy issues cannot be explained by a disinterest or lack of knowledge. It can be explained only as a deliberate attempt to avoid airing views he knows are widely unpopular, but which are mainstream within the Democratic Party.

When he finally delivered a significant foreign policy address, in May, it was at the Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies at Indiana University, which is named in honor of former Democratic Congressman Lee H. Hamilton and former Republican Senator Richard G. Lugar, both pillars of the foreign policy establishment.

Buttigieg denounced China for “authoritarian capitalism” and a poor record on human rights, citing in particular the plight of Muslim Uighurs in Sinkiang, a longtime target of CIA efforts to destabilize the Beijing regime. He called for stepped-up US investment in infrastructure and education in order to “compete for the global economic future.” And he referred sarcastically to Trump’s dealings with Moscow, calling Russia “not a real estate opportunity but an adversarial actor.”

In 2018, the Truman Center released a messaging pamphlet for elected officials and candidates that completely coincides with the Democrats’

right-wing campaign against Trump over foreign policy. The first section, for example, declares Russia an “historic adversary” of the United States and asserts that the intelligence community (which is directly represented on the Truman Center’s board) has “decisively confirmed” that Russia “interfered” in the 2016 elections.

In light of Buttigieg’s national security background, his campaign proposal for the establishment of a “national service” program has particularly ominous implications. Buttigieg argues that such a program is necessary to promote a feeling of unity and “social cohesion” within the American population. In reality, such a program would amount to a return to the draft, combined perhaps with labor conscription, which could be used to suppress wages and living standards in the working class.

Whether or not Buttigieg ultimately wins the nomination, and at this point the possibility seems remote, his sudden elevation in advance of the primaries flows from definite political considerations within the Democratic Party itself. Whoever ultimately wins the nomination must be acceptable to the corporate aristocracy and the military apparatus the Democrats represent. However, the debacle of the Hillary Clinton campaign revealed, much to the Democrats’ surprise, that any figure publicly identified with social inequality and war is liable to be deeply hated, particularly within the working class.

Within this context, Buttigieg has emerged as a figure whose particular combination of personal characteristics—his youth, his sexual identity as a gay man, his association with the industrial Midwest where Clinton was wiped out by Trump, his media-concocted reputation for intelligent public speaking, and, above all, his lack of a well-known political track record—might serve as a more suitable package for the same brand of politics.

One gets the sense that the Democratic Party is attempting replicate its success with Barack Obama, whose formless demagogy about “hope” and “change” was able to divert popular hostility to the political establishment, allowing the voters to see in him what they wanted to see. Buttigieg’s status as the first gay man to become a serious presidential hopeful would thus parallel Obama’s role as the “first black president.”

In the context of popular disillusionment with eight bitter years under Obama, however, it is unlikely the Democrats will be able to pull off the same trick twice.



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