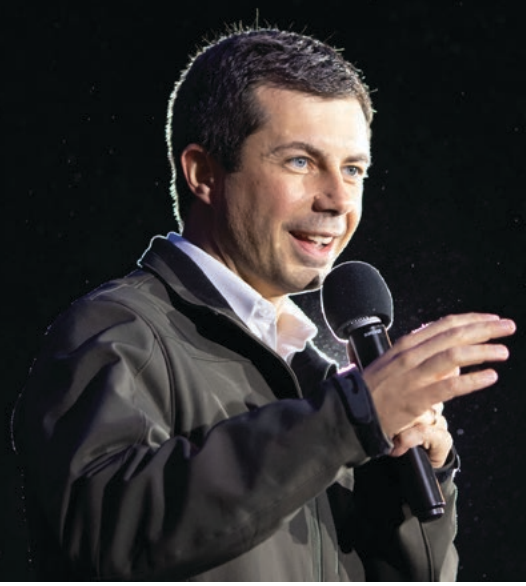
Reading Buttigieg

James T. Kloppenberg

A former teacher's perspective



Buttigieg participates in a town hall in Waterloo, Iowa, September 22, 2019.

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In 1972, I cast my first ballot in a presidential election, with pride and conviction, for George McGovern. To me and to many of his enthusiastic young supporters, McGovern embodied the once-vibrant progressive farm-labor tradition of the upper Midwest. His embrace of ideas championed by Eugene McCarthy and Bobby Kennedy four years earlier, his opposition to the war in Vietnam, and his support of proposals such as a guaranteed annual income and a dramatic increase in the estate tax endeared him to many student radicals—at least those who had not abandoned mainstream politics for other alternatives. McGovern of course was buried by Richard Nixon in one of the biggest landslides in U.S. history, winning less than 38 percent of the popular vote and losing the Electoral College 520 to 17. The bumper stickers that appeared when the Watergate scandal broke—"Don't blame me, I'm from Massachusetts"—provided comic relief at a moment when American democracy seemed to many on the left mired in muck.

Like many members of my generation, I have been unable to forget the lesson I learned in 1972. In the eleven subsequent presidential elections, I have worried that no candidate I could support with pride and conviction could be elected to national office. I was anxious that even Barack Obama, whom many of us left-leaning Democrats admired for his character and his intelligence as much as for his political skills, might have trouble balancing his commitments to deliberation and compromise with the steps required to advance the core ideals of American democracy, autonomy and equality. The same fears plague me now.

The contest for this year's Democratic Party presidential nomination began promisingly enough. A raft of able and experienced candidates, including Obama's vice president Joe Biden and U.S. senators Michael Bennet, Cory Booker, Kirsten Gillibrand, Kamala Harris, Amy Klobuchar, and Bernie Sanders, offered the prospect of a lively and unpredictable race for the nomination. Like many overeducated people toward the left end of the political spectrum, I consider Elizabeth Warren, from my own state of Massachusetts, one of the strongest candidates in my lifetime. My enthusiasm for her, predictably, makes me uneasy. Following the disaster of 2016, the Democratic Party came into this electoral cycle with a battle-tested first team and a deep bench of veterans. Surely one of them would emerge to unite the party and counter the forces that propelled the least qualified and most dishonest candidate in American history into the White House.

But it hasn't happened. Instead the race has remained inchoate. Even the *New York Times* editorial board couldn't decide: it endorsed both the more progressive Warren and the more moderate Klobuchar, an option that will not be available to any voters. Granted, American democracy is a mess. Sophisticated gerrymandering, a 24/7 news cycle in which echo chambers and confirmation bias undercut the very idea of nonpartisan fact-finding, the declining engagement of an increasingly cynical and poorly informed electorate, and the infusion of enormous amounts of invisible money into public life all endanger the lifeblood of popular government, the integrity of our electoral politics. The president's acquittal in his impeachment trial, despite overwhelming evidence demonstrating his corruption and obstruction of justice, shows how low the Republican Party has sunk into the swamp of hyper-partisanship.

Of course character assassination, misdirection, and simple skullduggery are as old as the 1790s, when party politics emerged in the new nation. Yet the depth, scope, and sheer number of President Trump's lies (already surpassing 16,000,

according to the *Washington Post*) is without precedent in U.S. history. So is the bewildering fidelity of the president's supporters, who seem to have become oddly immune to his deceit, self-dealing, vulgarity, and venality. All the Democratic frontrunners have scrambled to demonstrate that they can win the crucial states that Hillary Clinton lost in 2016—and to distance themselves from each other. So far, none has been able to separate herself or himself decisively from the pack. Instead, the big surprise has been the meteoric rise of a formerly unknown newcomer, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, who seemed to come out of nowhere.

Except that he did not. I have known Buttigieg since he was an undergraduate at Harvard. I taught Peter, as he was known then, in two classes during his senior year, 2003–2004. He was a frequent visitor to office hours, and seeing him two or three times a week during nine months meant that we became pretty well acquainted. We stayed in touch after he graduated. Although his transcript showed that I was one of the few Harvard professors to give him anything less than an A grade, he asked me to write one of the letters of recommendation for the Rhodes scholarship that took him to Oxford. A few years after he returned from England, I met with him, and with a couple dozen of his politically active peers, to talk about my book *Reading Obama* at a gathering he helped organize. When Buttigieg was elected mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and he returned to Cambridge for conferences at the Kennedy School of Government, we got together to discuss everything from the details of smart sewers and street paving to the intractable, perennial challenges of urban renewal and race relations in a once-prosperous city struggling with deindustrialization.

Since Buttigieg launched his campaign for the presidency last year, I have read or reread much of what he has written, at Harvard and since. Most notable is his excellent memoir *Shortest Way Home*, with its lyrical evocations of the Indiana landscape, its vivid account of military life in Afghanistan, its rollicking tales of campaign stops featuring Deep Fried Turkey Testicles and peanut-butter-and-bacon sandwiches dusted with powdered sugar, and its incisive analysis of the rewards and frustrations of life as mayor of a small city. I have spoken with a number of his friends, former classmates, and people active in his campaign. I had a very good meeting with him, after one of his recent fundraising events in Boston, about the experiences that have shaped his sensibility. I wanted to discuss with him the ideas that had mattered most to him, and to find out more about the relation between his religious faith and his political convictions. This article profiles the college student I got to know at Harvard and the budding political insurgent who, like many of his friends, was troubled by the acquiescence of the Democratic Party of Bill Clinton and after in the so-called Reagan Revolution of tax cuts and deregulation. I pay less attention to Buttigieg the savvy and agile presidential candidate. Because he has made himself available to countless audiences, readers with access to YouTube can view hundreds of videos of Mayor Pete giving stump speeches or participating in debates, doing television or radio interviews, and meeting in town halls with the curious and the skeptical, with adoring fans and hate-filled hecklers. Of the people I have spoken with who knew Peter twenty years ago, few expected he would be running for president in 2020. Fewer are surprised to see him performing so well.

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Both of Buttigieg's parents taught at Notre Dame, so he grew up familiar with the strengths and the quirks of the academic world. Family friends say that as a boy Buttigieg was an articulate, pleasant conversationalist, as comfortable talking with grown-ups as playing with kids his own age. He excelled academically at St. Joseph High School in South Bend, graduating as senior class president and valedictorian. Along the way he wrote a prize-winning essay on Bernie Sanders, of all people, whom he admired for the courage of his unconventional socialist convictions and his willingness, at least at that stage of his career, to work with members of both major parties. The reward for that essay was a trip to Boston's John F. Kennedy Library, where Buttigieg was introduced to Sen. Ted Kennedy.

Having grown up in the shadow of Notre Dame's Golden Dome, Buttigieg was hardly overawed by the red-brick buildings of Harvard Yard or intimidated by Harvard's professors. His parents, who moved from New Mexico State to Notre Dame before he was born, made sure he was immersed in books and ideas. His father, Joe Buttigieg, an ebullient Maltese immigrant, studied Joyce and Gramsci and taught English literature. His mother, Anne Montgomery, a native of southern Indiana, taught linguistics and nurtured her son's fascination with languages. Given his family background, he entered Harvard just about as well prepared academically as classmates who had attended glossy prep schools.

Buttigieg never lacked confidence. After Ted Sorensen spoke at Harvard's Institute of Politics (IOP) during Buttigieg's freshman year, Buttigieg posed a challenging question to the man who

had served as JFK's chief speechwriter: If Kennedy had decided to bomb Cuba during the missile crisis, how would Sorensen have framed the speech necessary to explain that step? The topic of war became less abstract in Buttigieg's sophomore year, when the 9/11 attacks brought Americans together—briefly, as it turned out—and George W. Bush took the nation to war in Afghanistan. Two years later, on the pretext that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction—a pretext that, it was later revealed, the Bush administration knew to be false—the United States went to war in Iraq.

By that time Buttigieg was already so deeply immersed in politics on campus that his mother wondered if he was as committed to studying History and Literature, his declared concentration, as he was to the IOP. After Bush invaded Iraq, Buttigieg delivered a speech at a rally in front of Harvard's Science Center explaining why he thought Americans should oppose the war. That speech persuaded more than a few of his fellow students, including Zachary Liscow, now a professor at Yale Law School, who remembers being impressed by Buttigieg's sincerity as well as his eloquence. Like many of his fellow Harvard College Democrats, Buttigieg was troubled by the party's apparent willingness to go along with Republican initiatives in domestic and foreign policy. When Sen. Ted Kennedy spoke at the IOP in 2003, Buttigieg challenged him by asking whether the Democrats had essentially become Republicans-lite or still offered a distinctive alternative to tax cuts and foreign wars. Kennedy's evasive answer, coming as it did from one of the most progressive members of the party, could only have confirmed the premise of Buttigieg's question.

In his junior and senior year, Buttigieg became more visible at Harvard, both because of articles he wrote for the student newspaper, the *Crimson*, and because he emerged as one of the central figures in the IOP. Together with his friends Previn Warren, now an attorney in New York and legal counsel in Buttigieg's campaign, and Ganesh Sitaraman, a professor at Vanderbilt Law School, formerly counsel in Warren's Senate office, and now an adviser in her campaign, Buttigieg spearheaded a drive to increase student input into decision-making at the IOP. In his first, jointly written article for the *Crimson*, Buttigieg urged his fellow students to view not only community service but also political engagement as a valuable form of extracurricular activity. Buttigieg himself had worked briefly in a shelter for battered women during the summer after his freshman year. But as was happening elsewhere, a rift was opening at Harvard between students committed to such work, or to tutoring students or volunteering at homeless shelters, on the one hand, and those committed to political action on the other. In the *Crimson* article Buttigieg expressed alarm at how few young people were voting, working in campaigns, or participating in demonstrations. "In a nation where a lifetime of honorable work in direct service could be wiped out by a single stroke of poor policy from an elected official or legislature, the absence of our generation's voice from the political process is a hazardous reality for anyone committed to social progress, and a red flag for democracy itself."

That commitment brought Buttigieg to my classes in his senior year. The course he took in the fall semester, Social Thought in Modern America, was described by the *Crimson* as "the toughest humanities class at the College, combining soul-crushingly dense and difficult material with a will-breaking workload." In other words, it was a class for people like Pete, Previn Warren, their friend and fellow IOP stalwart Ilan Graff, and fifty-two other smart, intellectually ambitious students keen to study the relation between ideas and politics in post–Civil War U.S. history. Because the course involved a great deal of class discussion, and student demand exceeded the number of names I could learn—and I believe teachers should know their students—I limited enrollment. Instead of choosing the class by lottery, as many professors do in such circumstances, I preferred to decide who should enroll.

To inform my judgments, I required interested students to write an essay explaining why the course was important to their studies at Harvard and, if possible, to their plans afterward. I also required interested students to meet with me, after I had read their essays, to discuss their reasons in greater detail. Because the course involved three discussions a week—twice a week for half of the ninety-minute lecture meetings, and once in the smaller discussion sections run by graduate students—I wanted to know which students were willing to stay on top of the readings, write the required three essays, and prepare for midterm and final examinations that involved identifying passages from the readings as well as writing synthetic essays.

Tempting as it is to contest the *Crimson*'s characterization, the course was, and has remained, demanding. The readings in 2003, which averaged 250 pages a week, included works of philosophy, social and political theory, religion, literature, and cultural criticism. Writers included the usual suspects for a course in American intellectual history: William James, John Dewey, and W.E.B. Du Bois; William Graham Sumner, Edward Bellamy, and Louis Brandeis; Chief Joseph, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Black Elk; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Jane Addams; Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, and Walter Lippmann; Reinhold Niebuhr, John Courtney Murray, and Martin Luther King, Jr.; Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and Malcolm X; Clement Greenberg, Allen Ginsburg, and Betty Friedan; Samuel Huntington, Daniel Bell, and Irving Kristol; Judith Butler, Robert Putnam, and Kwame Anthony Appiah; and others. Students wrote essays on topics such as the impact of science on post–Civil War culture; the role of ethnic diversity and racial differences in shaping twentieth-century American politics and ideas; varieties of American feminist thought; and the relation between pragmatist philosophy and democracy. In short, the course was not intended for those who, in the words of *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat (himself a survivor of the course), were looking to "skate through" Harvard.

Why did Buttigieg want to take such a course? He was busy enough that year. To the surprise of many, he had been elected to a time-consuming office, president of the IOP Stu-

dent Advisory Board. The position often goes to an openly ambitious political animal, of which Harvard has its share, rather than a fresh-faced, bookish, fledgling policy wonk such as Buttigieg. In his IOP post he faced the challenge of trying to implement the plans that he and his friends Previn Warren and Ganesh Sitaraman had proposed the year before. Buttigieg had committed to writing a column, "Liberal Art," every two weeks for the *Crimson*. He was in the midst of writing his senior thesis, a study of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* and the enduring legacy—in Vietnam and, at least implicitly, in Iraq—of what the seventeenth-century New England Puritans had described as their "errand in the wilderness." He was also trying to figure out where his future lay.

He had already volunteered in the unsuccessful campaigns of Al Gore in 2000 and, two years later, those of Massachusetts gubernatorial candidate Robert Reich and Indiana congressional candidate Jill Thompson. But like many of his friends, Buttigieg was now looking for something beyond conventional, and increasingly tired, Democratic Party politics. The party needed to stand for something that could inspire commitment, something other than opposition to Reaganism. In the *Crimson* he observed how easy it was to criticize the bumbling, inarticulate Bush, but complained that none of the Democrats vying for the 2004 nomination had offered a "clearly articulated, positive vision for America." Party leaders needed instead to emphasize the "sense of justice and mutual responsibility" offended by Republican tax cuts, not merely vent their outrage at the Bush administration.

In the essay explaining his reasons for wanting to take Social Thought, Buttigieg wrote that he had wanted to take the course as a sophomore but had been advised to wait. He now expected the course to "anchor" his interests in both history and literature and to help provide a framework for his senior thesis. In light of his career path, the final sentences of his essay are intriguing. "The importance of understanding American social thought also extends beyond my education itself and into my future plans. I seek to work in politics, and I am increasingly aware that part of my motivation to do so is the feeling that present political practice is at odds with the best American intellectual tradition." While that awareness had "framed my thinking and arguments," he wrote, "I need to develop a broader and more sophisticated understanding of the American theories that shaped, and were informed by," our nation's history. "Knowing the intellectual context of familiar events in political history is essential," he concluded, "if I am to stand my ground convincingly and seriously in the political present." My notes from my first conversation with him confirm my initial response to his essay: here was a student ready to think hard about links between yesterday and today. On the campaign trail, when Buttigieg differentiates positive freedom, or the freedom *to* act in order to realize one's goals, from mere negative freedom, simple freedom *from* interference, he knows he is channeling the ideas of John Dewey.

Meeting with Buttigieg often through the semester, I was impressed by the depth of his commitment to politics. He was particularly interested in the ways in which progressive reform movements had been driven forward by people of deep religious faith. From the Social Gospel of the 1890s and 1900s through the New Deal and the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, many of the leaders and most of the foot soldiers had been inspired by their religious ideals. A central theme of the course was the rise—and perhaps, after 9/11, the fall—of what was frequently called "the culture of irony," the late twentieth century's postmodern skepticism about dogmas and distrust of eternal truths. In my lectures I emphasized the ways in which the founders of the American philosophy of pragmatism a century earlier had disclosed the contingency of ideas while continuing to embrace the ideals of democracy. The challenge of the twenty-first century, the challenge facing this generation of students, was to construct from the ashes left by the culture of irony, which seemed to disintegrate with the Twin Towers, their own democratic ideals.

That was the question that engaged Buttigieg more than any other. How could Americans unite politically when American culture was becoming increasingly polarized? Conservatives condemned ideas celebrated in university humanities departments. Radicals relished the triumph of perspectivalism over outdated forms of universalism, whether grounded in religious traditions or Enlightenment rationalism. How could that chasm be bridged?

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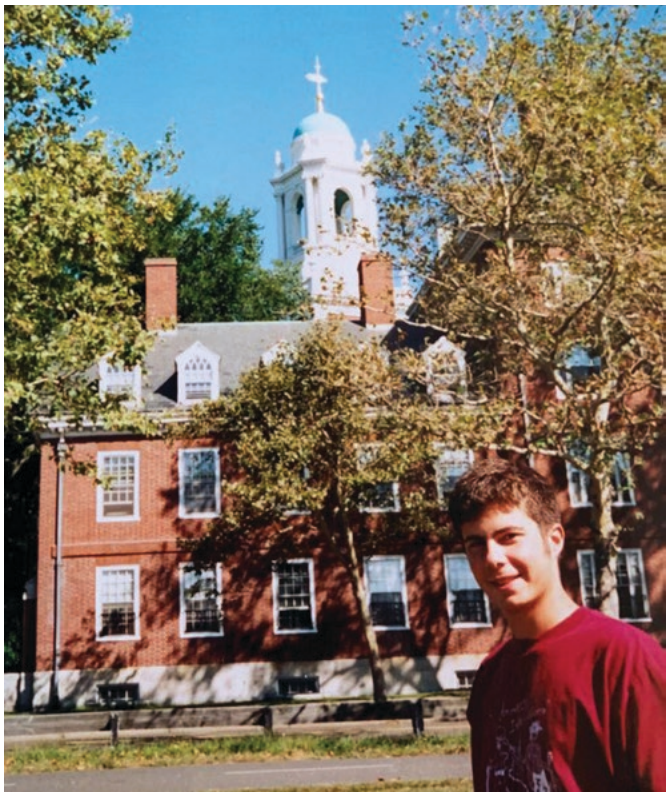
I knew Buttigieg had grown up in South Bend, and I knew his parents taught at Notre Dame. I do not remember whether we talked about Catholicism. None of the former Harvard students I have talked with in recent months remember him as being particularly religious while he was an undergraduate. His mother, although a practicing Catholic, was not particularly "churchy," as he put it to me in our recent conversation. His father was an atheist. Although Buttigieg was raised Catholic and educated

in a Catholic high school, by the time he left for college he was already questioning the church. He was still attracted to what he called the "social justice" dimension of Catholicism, the preferential option for the poor proclaimed by the Catholic bishops in 1971. That commitment had prompted him to join, and later become president of, the St. Joseph High School chapter of Amnesty International. But by the time he arrived at Harvard, the church's unyielding adherence to theological dogma and doctrines he considered outdated had begun to make him uneasy. At Harvard he drifted away. Occasionally Buttigieg attended services at Memorial Church, if only to hear the extraordinary sermons preached by high-church Episcopalian Peter Gomes, but he seems to have kept his changing religious views pretty much to himself.

Buttigieg's interest in reestablishing the link between religion and progressive politics, however, had grown stronger as a result of serving as a research assistant on two projects, one for pollster John Della Volpe and another for David King of the Kennedy School. He learned that Midwestern independents of his generation often took their political bearings from the religious traditions in which they were raised, as he had done himself. He was troubled that the Democratic Party had relinquished religion to America's conservative evangelicals. Not only was that a serious strategic error, but it also helped explain the party's lack of a positive, unifying direction. Although Buttigieg no longer considered himself Catholic, he remained "curious," to use his word, about varieties of theology and religious experience. He worried that the prospects for progressive political mobilization were dimmed by the lack of any orientation toward clear goals grounded on solid moral convictions.

Like his Harvard friends Warren and Sitaraman, as an undergraduate Buttigieg wanted to renew the early twentieth-century American progressives' dual commitments to ending corruption and revitalizing popular government. Conjuring up a positive moral vision, a new form for the shared religious commitments that had animated earlier champions of democracy, was the challenge facing his generation. To that end, Buttigieg also enrolled in another course of mine in the spring of his senior year, Democracy in Europe and America. At the time I was working on the book that became *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought*, which has sparked controversy in part because of my emphasis on the role played by post-Reformation Christian ideals in the modern history of popular government. That was one of the central themes of my lectures. The readings in that class ranged even more broadly, from Thomas More, Montaigne, and the Puritans of England and New England through Locke and Rousseau, Jefferson and John Adams, Mary Wollstonecraft and Judith Sargent Murray, Kant and Burke, Madison and Tocqueville, Hegel and Marx, Grimké and Mill, Nietzsche and Jaurès, Weber and Dewey, and Schumpeter and Hayek, to works by more recent writers such as Fanon and Habermas. Although a number of undergraduates and graduate students, including Sitaraman, sat in on some of my lectures, Buttigieg was the only student that year to enroll in both courses. Either he was a glutton for punishment or he was genuinely committed to the study of politics and ideas.



Buttigieg as an undergraduate at Harvard

In his 2003–04 *Crimson* columns, as uneven as the work of most undergraduate writers, Buttigieg's running commentary on political developments eerily foreshadows our situation in 2019–20. He pointed out how Republicans since Newt Gingrich had shrewdly shanghaied the political vocabulary with terms such as "death tax" and "right to work" and how crucial "the power of imagery" was—the simplified, doctored, manufactured pictures, sound bites, and slogans fed to the public by visual and print media. After John Kerry had secured the Democratic nomination, Buttigieg observed that the Democrats so far had offered only "a complaint, not an argument." They needed instead a compelling positive program to unite the nation. He listed several examples, including ways to end our dependence on fossil fuels, a national-service program, and a single-payer health-care system. Simply maligning the Bush administration would not suffice.

In his final column before commencement, Buttigieg implored Harvard students to cultivate compassion, "the human capacity to feel another's suffering as one's own"; strength, which he defined not as throwing your weight around as an individual or a nation but as "finishing what you start"; and morality, not confined to the domain of marital fidelity, as it had been redefined since the Clinton scandals, but in the broader sphere of civic and public life, where con-

COURTESY OF THE BUTTIGIEG CAMPAIGN

cern with it—as with compassion and strength—had all but vanished as a result of the Reagan revolution and the culture of greed it had encouraged.

By the end of their senior year, I had gotten to know Buttigieg, Warren, and Sitaraman well enough to join them and a couple of their friends for beers at Charlie's, the IOP hangout across the street from Harvard's Kennedy School. I do not remember exactly what topics we discussed. I do remember thinking that these students, smart, articulate, deeply committed to democratic politics and searching for new ideas, gave me reasons not to despair. In May of 2004, the Democratic Party remained torn between its fading progressives, such as Howard Dean, and its moderates, such as the eventual nominee Kerry. Democrats seemed committed only, as Buttigieg had put it to Ted Kennedy, "to being for whatever the Republicans are for, only less." Given the party's lack of a clear direction, the dispiriting prospect of George W. Bush's reelection seemed a distinct possibility. Because I was impressed by these graduating seniors' passion for politics, it is likely that we talked about what Max Weber called "politics as a vocation." The very concept of a vocation, very much a part of growing up Catholic in the 1950s and '60s, had gone out of fashion. I like to resurrect it whenever I can. When Buttigieg himself came back to Harvard in 2016 to talk with graduating seniors, he urged them to worry less about the titles they would hold in twenty years than about the roles they wanted to play. By the time he graduated, he recalled, he had already become aware that "fulfillment and purpose would come through service to others."

After commencement, Buttigieg went to work for the presidential campaign of John Kerry, which gave him experience with four candidates in a row who came up short. Following a stint working in Washington, D.C., he packed up for Tunisia to continue his study of Arabic. When he decided to apply for a Rhodes scholarship, he asked me to write a letter of recommendation. Although surprised, I was happy to endorse his application even though, as I noted in the letter, his performance in my courses placed him only "in the middle of the pack." Instead I detailed his work outside the classroom. I noted that his immersion in the IOP and his column for the *Crimson*, valuable as they might have been, "represented a gamble" for anyone thinking about graduate school, and that such work "reflected the depth of his commitment to political action."

I concluded the letter with a judgment that still rings true to me. I will reproduce it here, at some length, precisely because it contrasts so strikingly with the numerous put-downs and dismissals that have accumulated in recent months, particularly from commentators on the left who consider Buttigieg a careerist not only too moderate in his politics but too slick for their taste:

Buttigieg points out that there is no formula for resolving the tradeoffs required in government. Data cannot yield answers to questions about who should suffer, and how much, when competing policies are debated.

> I admire his talent, his agility, and his devotion to public service. At a time when so many equally capable recent Harvard graduates are off feathering their own nests, Peter is doing the thankless work of political organizing, not because he expects a reward but because he believes it is important. Many would describe his choice as quixotic, but I respect it. Peter unquestionably has the capacity to excel at Oxford and afterwards. He thinks clearly and writes beautifully. Beyond his obvious talent, he has a backbone. It is his strength of character, the depth of his democratic convictions, that will make him a forceful presence in American public life.

Buttigieg followed a well-worn path of Rhodes Scholars at Oxford, studying Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. The tutorials in politics went smoothly enough, but the rigors of analytic logic, contemporary moral philosophy, and neoclassical economics taxed even his considerable brainpower. Of particular value, he told me recently, were his tutorials on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and moral philosophy more generally. He noted especially the impact of John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. Rawls's concept of the "arbitrariness of fortune" resonated especially with Buttigieg, as it did for Rawls himself, due to personal experience. In Rawls's case it was the deaths of his two brothers from diseases they contracted from Rawls; in Buttigieg's case the contrast between the misfortune endured by one of his childhood friends and the exceedingly good fortune he had enjoyed throughout his life. He was also drawn to the ideas of the philosophers Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel, whose concept of moral luck invites us to acknowledge the difficulty of assessing blame for actions over which individuals have no control.

Reading Robert Nozick's defense of libertarian principles, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, while studying economics illuminated for Buttigieg the reasons why conservatives trust the market and distrust government, a valuable lesson for anyone on the political left. As Buttigieg explains it in *Shortest Way Home*, his course of study at Oxford, which required him to "master the basics of supply and demand, utility, preferences,

auction theory, and market equilibrium," left him admiring "the theoretical elegance of the free market under perfect conditions," but it also allowed him to see how and why those perfect conditions "get skewed in the real world." In Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, he was trying to tie together theory and practice.

The other important development during his Oxford years was Buttigieg's return to religion. He told me he was put off by the intolerant "hard-edged atheism" he encountered at Oxford. He could not square such doctrinaire atheism, which he found as rigid as the dogmas of Catholicism that had repelled him, with his own experience. Whether it was the convincing arguments in the tradition of phenomenology, arguments made by Nagel and others (from William James onward) about how to make sense of the puzzling fact of one's own consciousness, or the equal impossibility of convincingly proving or disproving God's existence, Buttigieg came to realize that his own faith was more deeply rooted than he had thought. Attending Anglican services at Oxford convinced him that he was "liturgically conservative," for aesthetic as well as spiritual reasons, even as he remained convinced that the Gospel message enjoins us to attend to society's outcasts rather than celebrate or defend the wealthy and prosperous. His choice to affiliate with Anglicanism thus predated by a decade his coming out as gay. He returned to the United States in 2007 a Christian seeking a home. He found it with Fr. Brian Grantz of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. James in South Bend. Buttigieg has worshiped there ever since his return to his hometown after three years living in Chicago, working for McKinsey and Company.

Nothing about Buttigieg's glittering résumé incenses his many critics on the left as much as his time with McKinsey, which is presented as obvious, irrefutable evidence that he is an unprincipled technocrat. In the forty years I have been teaching, I have known plenty of humanities or social-science students who decided—in at least one case on the advice of a respected parish priest—to explore the private sector in order to develop skills they could then put to use as they saw fit. In his memoir, Buttigieg explains he had been prepared for a career "in public service, inquiry, and the arts, not business. But I knew that I would have to understand business if I wanted to make myself useful in practice." Because he "felt ignorant about how the private sector really worked," McKinsey provided "a good training ground." A few students I've known have stuck with consulting after their first three years, but most have gone in other directions. Some now work for foundations, others in politics, the law, or other professions. One, whom I know particularly well, put his McKinsey experience to use by establishing a secondary school in a township outside Johannesburg. Although McKinsey plunged Buttigieg into unfamiliar worlds, including the mysteries of grocery pricing, "working not for a cause but a client" soon proved unsatisfying because, as he puts it bluntly in his memoir, "I didn't care."

Now that the details of Buttigieg's work with McKinsey have been released, the utter lack of authority he exercised and the unsurprisingly banal nature of his research projects has become apparent. As a result, the furor seems to have died down, at least for most people. Buttigieg volunteered in our conversation that one of the most valuable things he had learned from my classes was the contrast between Max Weber's account of instrumental rationality—the means-ends reasoning that was threatening to eclipse a focus on morality or tradition—and John Dewey's insistence on the value-laden nature of all decision making. At McKinsey Buttigieg learned the techniques of data analysis, an important tool for anyone in public life. But to dismiss him as a "whiz kid" akin to the best and brightest who took the United States into Vietnam is to misunderstand him. The young man who has written for twenty years about the folly of U.S. foreign crusades, about our unwitting walk into the "jaws of a trap" set for us by Al-Qaeda, about our "self-defeating" approach to terrorism, and about the need for the Democratic Party to offer a positive, social-democratic program knows the difference between means and ends. Buttigieg understands that it was precisely the Bush administration's blindness to that difference, and to what we should have learned from earlier episodes of adventurism, that has kept us mired in Afghanistan and Iraq for nineteen years and counting.

In one of the most powerful passages in *Shortest Way Home*, Buttigieg points out that there is no formula for resolving the tradeoffs required in government. Data cannot yield answers to questions about who should suffer, and how much, when competing policies are debated. Questions of efficiency must be weighed against considerations of mercy. Although Buttigieg concedes how tempting it is for officials to treat all issues as mere "technical problems," as Robert McNamara did in Vietnam, Buttigieg insists that it is a mistake. "Elected officials earn our keep by settling moral questions, ones where there is no way to make someone better off without making someone else worse off." William James observed that in any ethical dilemma, "some part of the ideal is butchered." It is rare for elected officials even to admit that problem, let alone call attention to it, as Buttigieg does in his account of the false promise of artificial intelligence to replace "the human function we call judgment."

The next time I encountered Buttigieg was in February 2010, when my book *Reading Obama* was in press. He and fellow Rhodes scholar Sabeel Rahman, another brilliant young law professor who is currently serving as president of the think tank Demos, together with Previn Warren, Ganesh Sitaraman, and about twenty other like-minded scholars and activists, invited me to a conference at Harvard Law School. They wanted to discuss Obama, and what he might mean for the future of the Democratic Party. It was not the first meeting of the group, nor was I the first guest to meet with them. In previous years they had welcomed, among others, the distinguished Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel, City Year founder Alan Khazei, and the young historian Angus Burgin, author of an outstanding book about the rise of the New Right, *The Great Persuasion*. I spent a fascinating morn-

ing with the group, explaining what I saw as the origins of Obama's devotion to deliberation and bipartisanship. Those commitments were already under fire from the left; many around the table were unpersuaded by my argument. Obama seemed to them just another too-pliant Democrat, unable, as all Democrats in their lifetimes had been, to escape the neoliberal framework Reagan bequeathed to the nation. That afternoon, polymath Roberto Unger, back at Harvard Law School after serving in the government of his native Brazil, presented a riveting indictment of Obama and the Democratic Party. Buttigieg, and most of those in attendance, greeted Unger's analysis with much greater enthusiasm.

Only a year later, having lost in his audacious bid to become Indiana State Treasurer in his first campaign for electoral office, Buttigieg became Mayor Pete. When he came back to Cambridge for meetings at the Kennedy School of Government, he was invigorated by the challenges he was wrestling with in South Bend. Formerly the home of powerhouses Studebaker and Bendix, as well as thriving businesses such as the Oliver Plow Company, the Folding Paper Box Company (the biggest in Indiana), and Birdsell Manufacturing, which proudly proclaimed itself the "largest makers of clover hullers in the world," the city had fallen on very hard times. Now pothole repairs and snow removal, redesigning traffic patterns and building bicycle paths, were among the urgent issues for Mayor Pete. If those problems presented fewer intellectual challenges than philosophical debates about how we should understand freedom, they were problems he could tackle using the technocratic tools obtained at McKinsey. He seemed engaged, even energized, by such work.

But of course there were deeper, more intractable problems than fixing sewers and controlling floods. Within days of his inauguration he faced the crisis that has dogged him ever since. South Bend's African American police chief was accused of tapping the phones of police officers. When the chief was under threat of indictment, Mayor Pete accepted his resignation. As he puts it in his memoir, in the circumstances "there was no good option," and he has paid a price for the decision he made. Buttigieg's major social initiative, rebuilding or restoring a thousand homes in a thousand days, received a lot of positive attention, but then it came under fire for failing to address the needs of the city's poorest residents. Businesses returned to South Bend's revived center, but they brought jobs for well-educated white-collar workers rather than the unemployed. All these criticisms are legitimate. Buttigieg has admitted that he made mistakes and did not accomplish everything he set out to do in his two terms as mayor. If he is to be held responsible for failing to solve the problems of race and poverty that have dogged the cities of America's industrial heartland for decades, he should also be given credit for what he did accomplish. But if, as one of his predecessors told him, serving as mayor was the best job he ever had, one cannot help but wonder why Buttigieg decided to leave.

Buttigieg's careful positioning of his campaign in the lane between the Warren/Sanders left and the Biden/Klobuchar center makes his critics wonder whether his commitment to equality and justice is as solid as his political instincts are shrewd.

While Buttigieg has attracted enough support among certain Democratic constituencies to win the Iowa caucus and finish a close second in the New Hampshire primary, he has also drawn sharp criticism from other candidates and their followers. Some of that criticism, as well as some of that support, seems to me based on misperceptions of who Buttigieg is and what he wants to do. In this article I have tried to show the depth of his commitment to policies considerably more progressive than those proposed by most Democratic candidates since George McGovern. He is the only candidate who has spoken frankly about the constraints imposed by the Reagan revolution, constraints both political and intellectual, that limited the horizons of the Clinton and Obama presidencies. He has said emphatically and repeatedly that he believes we have come to the end of that era and must return to the social-democratic ideals and policies put in place between the New Deal and the Reagan revolution, the years when the economy grew, inequality shrank, and a generation of Americans ascended into the middle class.

For that reason I would not draw quite as bright a line between him and, say, Elizabeth Warren as most commentators, and Warren herself, have tended to do. On most issues they agree more than they disagree. Buttigieg readily admits that one of his most ambitious ideas, his plan for expanding (not packing) the Supreme Court to address the problem of rampant partisanship in judicial appointments, comes from his Harvard friend—and Warren adviser—Ganesh Sitaraman. (He quipped to E. J. Dionne, and to me, that he was sorry to have "lost the Ganesh primary" to Warren.) Further illustrating their similarities, Warren has recently altered one of her most controversial plans, her call for the immediate implementation of Medicare for All rather than a gradual transition. That shift aligns her more closely with Buttigieg on this crucial issue. Differences do remain. Should public universities be free for everyone,

as Warren and Sanders argue, or is Buttigieg right that those with ample resources should pay their own way? Scholars have shown that means-tested programs have proved more politically vulnerable than universal programs, and that is an important consideration. But is it clear which of their plans is more egalitarian—or more politically viable?

Buttigieg is the first openly gay candidate for the presidential nomination of a major party in the United States. That fact seems to matter less to many voters than most people had expected. Yet there are clearly people who would not vote for him for just that reason; opposition to LBGTQ rights remains as persistent as racism. Buttigieg also supports protecting women's right to abortion, the Green New Deal, and increasing taxes on the wealthy to make possible expanded child care and other social programs. With such plans, Buttigieg might be expected to attract many young voters on the left. Yet he has been the target of sustained, often hyperbolic attacks, for a number of reasons.

Perhaps most obviously, Buttigieg represents a threat to the candidacies of Sanders and Warren, so it is no surprise that their loyalists have lashed out at him. He earned a degree *magna cum laude* from Harvard, a coveted First from Oxford, and worked at McKinsey, all of which can be perceived as making him an elitist incapable of understanding or attracting working-class voters. He volunteered to serve in the military in Afghanistan, so he can be caricatured as a hawk despite his persistent criticism of America's unwarranted and repeated interventions. He fired a black police chief and has not yet demonstrated that he can attract support from African Americans beyond South Bend. If, skeptics ask, he still believes in the social-democratic principles he has endorsed for two decades, why is he using the language of "free choice," long a conservative talking point, to distinguish his health care and college plans from those of Sanders and Warren? His careful positioning of his campaign in the lane between the Warren/Sanders left and the Biden/Klobuchar center makes his younger critics wonder whether his commitment to the ideals of equality and justice is as solid as his political instincts are shrewd. Given the strong field of Democratic candidates, many young leftists wonder why he chose not to remain in South Bend. If he is as committed to reenergizing public life at the local and state level as he says he is in *Shortest Way Home*, why not remain Mayor Pete, gain more experience, and then run for statewide or national office later? Finally, Buttigieg's refusal to participate in what he calls the "oppression sweepstakes" earns him the ire of those incensed by the persistence of racial and gender hierarchies and fiercely committed, sometimes above all, to identity politics.

Instead Buttigieg has emphasized his Midwestern roots and his empathy for white, small-town and rural voters, many of whom turned to the Tea Party, or perhaps voted for Trump even after having voted for Obama. He understands that the lives of millions of Americans, whites as well as people of color, have been upended in recent decades. They are justifiably fed up with both parties' empty promises. He calls for uniting Americans, as Obama did, rather than slicing the electorate into pieces that can be combined into a brittle coalition of particular interest groups with little or nothing in common. Unless Democrats can bring Americans together, he argues, they will be unable to regain control of local and state governments. Unless they can do that, winning the White House will make far less difference than our obsessive focus on it might suggest. While many Democrats seem to be looking down on frustrated rural and Rust Belt voters with "condescension bordering on contempt," Buttigieg remains convinced from his experience in South Bend that "bedrock Democratic values around economic fairness and racial inclusion could resonate very well in the industrial Midwest, but not if they were presented by messengers who looked down on working and lower-middle-class Americans."

As he has been saying since he was an undergraduate at Harvard, Buttigieg believes that the challenge facing Democrats is to engage with people across the nation, people with very different cultural values, by connecting the aspirations of our politics with "the richness of everyday life." Otherwise the party might be able to satisfy self-righteous coastal elites, but it will continue to fail to generate majorities in diverse communities across the nation. It is paradoxical that the sharpest criticism Buttigieg has received has come from just those coastal elites, particularly members of his generation and younger, while his greatest strength has come from older voters, many of whom are tired of the familiar contenders and ready to welcome this likeable newcomer. The divided perceptions of Buttigieg between younger and older left-leaning voters itself illustrates some of the mistrust and animosity that he has identified as one of the Democratic Party's deepest problems.

One of the striking features of Buttigieg's hundreds of campaign appearances has been their consistency. He does not appear to worry about tailoring his appeal to any particular group; his message has been the same wherever he goes. His consistent emphasis on bringing together different American voters around a common agenda does not depend on demonizing others. Instead, he lays out his own vision of a nation committed less to individual success and unregulated free enterprise than to the values of compassion, strength, and morality that he articulated almost two decades ago and continues to cherish. Residual dissatisfaction with Obama, the belief that he squandered the few opportunities he enjoyed by wasting too much time and energy on conciliation, also helps explain the uneasiness of many young people on the left when they hear Buttigieg use that language rather than Warren's or Sanders's calls to battle.

Buttigieg laughed when he admitted to me that he did not expect, when he declared his candidacy, to be the "the religion guy." His frequent invocations of his Christian faith strike me as sincere rather than strategic. When he discusses climate change, he talks about our duty to be stewards of God's creation. When he discusses immigration and poverty, he invokes the Beatitudes. When he discusses gender and sexuality, he

says his own orientation is not his choice but that of his creator. Everyone I have talked with agrees that nobody—by his own account even including Buttigieg himself—was aware he was gay until shortly before he came out during his campaign for reelection as mayor of South Bend. The cultural and legal changes that made his marriage as well as his reelection possible have been so rapid that we can forget he would have been ostracized at St. Joseph High School had he come out as a teenager in the 1990s. As far as I can tell, no one who knew him at Harvard or Oxford had any inkling of Buttigieg's orientation. I saw only one reference to the subject in his *Crimson* columns: "public morality includes acknowledging the humanity and rights of homosexuals, though peddlers of hate invoke it to do the opposite." Obama, Cory Booker, and Elizabeth Warren have also spoken frequently about the link between their Christian faith and their progressive politics, but no Democrat in recent decades has spoken about the connection more often, more forcefully, or in relation to as many particular issues as has Buttigieg.

The most durable goal of American democracy has always been the common good, not the rights of individuals or the good of particular segments of the population. Buttigieg shares that commitment. I find it odd that it infuriates so many Democrats, who do not share his belief in the possibility of constructing a shared public interest through democratic deliberation. Yet that ideal is deeply rooted in American history. When skeptics express their concern that a thirty-eight year old has the experience necessary for the presidency, I remind them that another champion of the idea of the common good, James Madison, was thirty-six years old in 1787, when he played a pivotal role at the Constitutional Convention and wrote his perennially influential essays in *The Federalist*. Youth does not necessarily mean immaturity, nor—as we see demonstrated every day by our president's tweets, taunts, tantrums, boasts, and recklessness—does good judgment necessarily come with age.

Despite his considerable strengths, Buttigieg is unlikely to be elected president in 2020. But we could—and possibly will—do worse. Whatever the outcome, Buttigieg has shown sufficient strength to suggest that he will be a figure to reckon with for decades to come. As he is fond of pointing out, he will not reach the age of the current president (or, one might add, some of his rivals for the Democratic nomination), until well after 2050. Buttigieg's intelligence, calm, quick wittedness, idealism, and hopefulness all remind me of Obama's most notable characteristics. Unfortunately, any Democrat elected president in 2020 will almost certainly face a House of Representatives as polarized as the one that stymied Obama throughout his two terms in office and a Senate as stubbornly partisan as the one that now protects Donald Trump from the consequences of his corruption. Like Obama, though, and unlike the most strident of his critics on the left, who see Buttigieg as nothing more than a moderate who lacks convictions, he understands that hatred and intransigence are not the cure for what ails American politics. They are the disease.

JAMES T. KLOPPENBERG, *Charles Warren Professor of American History at Harvard, is the author most recently of* Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition *(Princeton University Press) and* Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought *(Oxford University Press).*