

In Pete Buttigieg, the Establishment Finds Their Man

Joe Biden was always a weak establishment front-runner.

Not that he was ever a lock, as the delirious early results out of the Hawkeye State demonstrate clearly he was not. But rather that he was generally mischaracterized as the establishment's gunner. There was a tidal wave of evidence to the contrary – from Barack Obama's ice-cold distance from his former lieutenant, both in 2016 and this time around, to longtime ally John Kerry's [barstool](#) musings over the weekend that he himself should jump in. Biden enjoyed compulsory respect from a news media generally incredulous over the rise of Donald Trump, due deference for his service as vice president, and a commitment that his rapturous support among African Americans wouldn't be litigated.

But he wasn't one of them. As liberal historian Thomas Frank notes, the unspoken credo of the Democratic Party's establishment today is simple: education and the meritocracy. Bill Clinton vaulted from white trash to the White House; in the back of his mind, he always thanked Georgetown, Yale, and the Rhodes program for rescuing a kid from Hope. And Obama ascended through Columbia, Harvard, a blue-chip law firm, and U Chicago on a journey of personal clarification before writing *The Audacity of Hope*.

Biden's story is different. And Biden's story may be over.

After what appears to be a surprise strong showing for former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, career Democrats are poised to dump Biden, the Amtrak amateur, for Mayor Pete, McKinsey's man in the Midwest. It's a better fit. The clarion call is clear: the contented and pragmatic in the Democratic ranks must unite, right now, against a candidate who can stop Bernie

Sanders.

Sanders is the candidate of those who have fallen out of the middle class. Buttigieg, though he would decidedly be the most liberal candidate to win the Democratic nomination in at least a generation, is nonetheless the avatar of the arrived, those who feel America is, in some way, still working. This is, of course, an interesting sentiment for anyone who witnessed the scene at Cedar Rapids Monday night.

That doesn't mean it won't work. But it will be extraordinary to watch. Buttigieg is Barack Obama without the charm, the youthful visage of the technocratic elite, even as technocracy melts down (on live TV, if the caucus room floor is any evidence). He offers the audacity of hope with little audacity and only a perfunctory pretense of hope. "Something is stirring in America," Buttigieg tweeted Tuesday in a remark that could have been made in any year. "I believe in American unity. I believe in American boldness," he said this week, with no elaboration.

Buttigieg's preemptive victory declaration Tuesday morning took on the air of a dare.

He says he won, and he would be the youngest president in history. Goldman Sachs, Google, and the deep state of the government are with him, he noted almost explicitly. The last three years of Donald Trump's presidency have been dominated by hushed, or not so hushed, talk of a coup. On Tuesday morning, America's politics felt, if only for a moment, truly Latin American.

Buttigieg is defined by his raw intelligence, which is obvious, but also by what he is not.

He is not an 80-year-old front-runner with a half-century of political baggage. He is not a socialist. He is not Donald Trump. Is it not enough? Apparently, for a high percentage of Iowans whose votes have been tallied and announced, it is.

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