

## A Modest Proposal

Charles J. Krumbein  
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Given that November 22, 2023, is the 60th anniversary of that horrific day when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated (my lord, has it been that long?), I have something that I have wanted to say for a very long time. For me personally, JFK was the first president that I ever saw with my own eyes, as he crossed Main Street in my hometown of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, accompanied by just two Secret Service men, and entered the Retlaw Hotel to give a campaign speech. This moment happened in 1960. I was still a teenager at the time; JFK became my hero as he went on from those hundreds of rallies and speeches to win the nomination and then the presidency over Richard M. Nixon. Many say that it was his appearance in those televised debates that put him over the top. Sadly, less than four short years later, his image was being shown on every channel again as his widow and their two small children stood at attention in Washington, D.C., as the catafalque bearing his murdered body passed by on its way to Arlington National Cemetery. We all lost some of our innocence in those sad and memorable days. I believe that I can say that most of us Marylanders have all-too-vivid memories that haunt us still to this day. I became a Marylander just five years after that tragic event.

When I finished teaching for UMUC in May of 1975, I put my career on hold for a few years while pursuing a PhD in English at UW-Madison. But the reality of having to earn a living for a young family soon caught up with me, leading to my resuming teaching for four years at UW-Platteville, two more years at UW-Whitewater, and doing a brief fill-in at UW-West Bend before deciding that I needed to look for something with a promise of more permanence, which I found with a twenty-five year stint with Clinton Community College in Iowa. As I have discussed in earlier memoirs, all of those jobs were ultimately made possible because of my strong start with UMUC, both as an experienced teacher and as one willing to handle long commutes in order to do the job. My how the world has changed over that span of almost thirty-five years since those heady days with the European Division.

It used to be the case that classrooms were among the safest places for both children and adults in America. The nuns that patrolled the elementary school of my childhood, armed with their knuckle-busting rulers, were quite enough both to scare away intruders and to keep their charges in line. School doors were wide open back then, but no one ever considered them to be a place where regular assaults with AR-15s would become almost a weekly item on the national nightly news programs. That has led to certain schools having armed guards patrol the hallways, a situation that often still is not enough to ensure the safety of students, faculty and administrators these days. It has now led to certain politicians suggesting that faculty be armed with high-powered weapons to the point where some parents are concerned that schools are no longer safe havens for their children. This world has become insane with its overkill of guns in the hands of everyone, like back in the days of Wyatt Earp.

While teaching in Clinton, Iowa, one of my many duties beyond just the five courses I taught every term, was to run the college theater program. I did that for the first nine years of

my tenure there. That involved every task from choosing the play, finding a director, scheduling auditions, begging for money from the school coffers, scheduling rehearsals, putting together the play program and even selling tickets. It was both challenging and exhausting. It was also personally rewarding to me. That was in addition to creating and producing the college literary magazine, putting together a summer Elderhostel program, and then also taking students, faculty and community personnel on an average of two trips abroad, along with organizing trips to Chicago for theater twice a year. It all kept me busy and exhilarated. At no time did I ever feel unsafe within my world of education in all of its varied forms.

It was my task as resuscitator and then jack-of-all-trades producer of what had long been a dormant theater program at CCC that gave me the most satisfaction outside of my teaching duties. We began small with light and frothy comedies, but soon graduated to taking on full-scale musicals such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Little Shop of Horrors*. However, the true highlight of that side career came with my desire to produce Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins*. While the play was still running in New York, I had been sent a detailed poster of it, which I promptly affixed to the wall over my office desk. I stared at that poster daily until one afternoon in the spring of 1992, I decided to call the New York company (Music Theatre International) that had the rights to that musical. I was told that no one could produce that show until it closed on Broadway. However, it was due to close in late August and that I should call back at that time. All summer long I read up on the show and became more enthused to try to produce it.

I had always been a history buff, earning a minor in that subject during my B.A. years. So discovering more about Abraham Lincoln and JFK, my two favorite presidents, merely furthered my determination to do the Sondheim musical. When I returned to CCC in late August for teacher orientation, I had the switchboard put through a call to MTI in New York. I was told that *Assassins* had now closed, but that anyone wishing to produce the play had first to secure the personal permission of Mr. Sondheim. So I told the woman to go ahead and ask him for that OK. I then checked around and found a movie props company in Morton Grove, IL, that could supply the weapons for such a show. About ten days later, I was sitting in my office when the front switchboard informed me that I had a call from New York. I asked to have the call put through, expecting a female voice with a response to my request. Instead, a male voice asked, "Is this Charles?" When I replied in the affirmative, the voice said, "This is Stephen Sondheim." I practically fell out of my chair!

My discussion with this musical genius lasted all of five minutes. What he wanted, as our school would be among the first to take on his musical outside of New York, was assurance that not one word of his script would be changed, that we would use very specific weapons in our production (which I was able to convey by my having contacted the Illinois movie props dealer), and that the show would not be recorded in any fashion. I was on the proverbial "Cloud 9" when I hung up the phone. I then called Aljon, Inc. in Morton Grove again and the props man assured me that he could provide the correct period pistol for our John Wilkes Booth, another pistol with an owl on its grip that was specified in the script, and even the very Mannlicher-Carcano rifle for our Lee Harvey Oswald that had just been used in the 1992 *Quantum Leap* episode in which Scott Bakula had leapt into Oswald. When he came to the college with a full trunk of weapons, accessories and blank cartridges, I also found out that this man had just supplied the weaponry for the 1992 Hollywood film *Hoffa* starring Jack Nicholson.

I was soon to learn more about weapons, quarter loads, half loads, and full loads of blanks than I ever knew. We had to have on hand at all times an experienced armorer who would supervise our show or else the props man would not release his weapons and rounds over to us. That was so that the actors would not be tempted to “play” with all of these valuable prop weapons.

Our production of *Assassins* took place from October 30-31 to November 1, 1992, just days before that year’s presidential election. We enhanced the show with help from the school’s media department, who put together a slide show of the various presidents and their assassins. It concluded with a giant target with Bill Clinton to the left, facing George H.W. Bush to the right and with a large question mark in the bulls-eye. We also had our art department fill empty brass cartridges from a rifle range with a material that was shaped like a bullet head, painted gold and baked into the empty metal piece to hand out one each to the audience as they entered the sold-out show. (I even took on the role of President James A. Garfield, sporting a stove-pipe hat, and was shot in the back just after uttering my two lines.) After dress rehearsal on Thursday night and by the end of Friday’s show, we had exhausted all of the quarter rounds and were well into the half rounds. That meant that the Sunday matinee audience was treated to very loud full loads of blank explosives, with a warning in the program. I have since seen *Assassins* produced on three occasions: one done by a community theater in Des Moines, Iowa, in early 1993, to which I transported my whole cast to see the show. I also saw it done as the second-ever production at London’s newly re-opened Donmar Warehouse, and then many years later at London’s Menier Chocolate Factory Theatre. In all three of those shows, they used off-stage “pops” instead of firing the actual weapons on stage. That was very disappointing, to say the least.

One other positive outcome of my exhilarating experience with Sondheim’s stirring musical was that I went on to compose one of what I consider to be my best poems. I have reproduced it here below. I am including this poetic piece along with a couple of notations. First of all, I do not own a gun. I never have and I never will. The 2nd Amendment tells me that I would first need to be a member of “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State...” and I see no need for that at all. In addition, aside from my enforced time on a rifle range while I was a member of the US Army, I have never fired a weapon, except for one time when I joined my late high school friend David Frisque on his family’s private property on the outskirts of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, where we took a bunch of used cans and bottles from the town dump and had ourselves a field day, topping it off with a large watermelon exploding in a way that would have made Gallagher proud.

I must say that there is a great life in education once one has such a terrific start, thanks to UMUC. I offer myself as proof of that happening. So I am now offering this modest proposal memoir after my experience with guns in a controlled and entertaining school setting over thirty years ago, and in light of the furor now being caused by the proliferation of guns and assault weapons in the American society of today. Much of that furor began to take hold on the American conscience on November 22, 1963, when the proliferation of guns in our society struck home to everyone watching television on that horrific weekend and its aftermath. The later political assassinations of both MLK and RFK in 1968 were further shocks to our way of life in this nation. At some point, this sheer madness must stop. However, unfortunately, it may not happen until a couple dozen more Columbines, Uvaldes or, God forbid, Sandy Hooks take

place, in which our children are the sacrificial lambs just as surely as Dean Swift proposed back in the 18th Century, before our politicians finally wake up and come around to agreeing that “enough is finally enough.” Until that day, I offer my tongue-in-cheek “modest proposal” poem below as one way to push to the extreme our collective conscience to help it to fall more in line nationally with that of Canada, Japan, the UK, Australia and other more sensible countries that seem to have resolved their issues with peoples’ rights “to keep and bear arms.”

### **“My English Teacher Has Just Bought A Gun”**

Oh, my English teacher is carrying a gun,  
Now my classes with him have lost some of their fun,  
When the hour is up, all the students start to run,  
‘Cause my English teacher is carrying a gun.

Oh, my English teacher now is carting a Colt,  
Even tirades on spelling now have a new jolt,  
I’ve learned correct comma usage, I’m no dolt  
When my English teacher now is carting a Colt.

Oh, my English teacher has strapped on a heater,  
So I’ve found that I come dressed a little neater--  
I even say a prayer addressed to St. Peter,  
For my English teacher has strapped on a heater.

Oh, my English teacher is packing him a rod,  
But I’ve learned to listen now, as if he were God,  
And I catch myself quick, before I start to nod,  
As my English teacher is packing him a rod.

Oh, my English teacher now is holstering iron,  
Which gives a new edge to his lessons on Byron;  
It’s no myth, I now can tell Charon from Chiron,  
See, my English teacher now is holstering iron.

Oh, my English teacher has two friends, Smith & Wesson,  
I listen faithfully to his every lesson  
Taking pages of notes, with them I’m not amessin’  
Since my English teacher has two friends, Smith & Wesson.

Oh, my English teacher’s weapon is next to his breast,  
So my writing is error-free, always my best,  
And I no longer ask for a true-and-false test  
For my English teacher’s weapon is next to his breast.

Oh, my English teacher now is toting a pistol,  
It makes the class sit up, as if on a thistle  
And gets our attention, like the gym teacher’s whistle,  
Knowing my English teacher now is toting a pistol.

Oh, my English teacher's shouldering a new .45,  
 And our basketball team gives him no rap or jive;  
 So I'm praying to get out of this course alive--  
 Lord, my English teacher's shouldering a new .45.

Oh, my English teacher's motto is "To Protect and Serve,"  
 When he gives me a "C" it is what I deserve--  
 Yes, to question a grade I just haven't the nerve  
 When my English teacher's motto is "To Protect and Serve."

Oh, my English teacher knows his butt from his barrel  
 So we haven't heard a whine from my friend Carol,  
 Nor a peep over due dates from her twin bro' Darrell,  
 'Cause my English teacher knows his butt from his barrel.

Oh, my English teacher's new gun has a magnum gauge,  
 And we take caution not to get him into a rage.  
 When we look in our books, we're all on the right page--  
 Yipes, my English teacher's new gun has a magnum gauge.

Oh, my English teacher's marksmanship has come a long ways  
 And so no one dares to sleep in class nowadays.  
 We've started a petition for his hefty raise,  
 Since my English teacher's marksmanship has come a long ways.

Oh, my English teacher's gun has an owl on its grip  
 So no one in the school gives him any more lip,  
 And the whole class has signed up for his London trip,  
 Well my English teacher's gun has an owl on its grip.

Oh, my English teacher commands rapt attention  
 As he asks for donations to "Mr. K's Pension,"  
 And the bulge 'neath his vest I won't even mention--  
 Yes, my English teacher commands rapt attention.

Oh, my English teacher is carrying a gun,  
 Now there's perfect attendance in all classes, son,  
 And we laugh at his jokes, which just adds to the fun--  
 Guess he knew what he was doing—carrying a gun.

--Charles J. Krumbein