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Archives keep us in touch with history as it happened, not as it is imagined

There are many ways we can be mistaken about our past, but the surest way is losing touch with it. Archives Week, co-sponsored by the University of Texas' School of Information (Oct. 26-Nov. 1), reminds us that we know who we are by remembering concretely who we were.



I am going up to West Point U.S. Military Academy

this week to lecture about why the ancient Greeks believed their city-states were worth dying for, how they promoted group cohesion among their young adult fighting men, and how their myths and moral systems helped to protect their soldiers from the most psychologically debilitating aspects of fighting and killing in battle or to repair the psychological damage done to soldiers in warfare. In preparing, I became interested in what might be called the Pvt. Ryan question: When has an individual or family given enough to our nation's fighting cause?

Think back to Stephen Spielberg's movie "Saving Private Ryan." In it, Abraham Lincoln's letter to a Mrs. Bixby of Boston, Mass., dated November 21, 1864, raises this question. The letter asserts that five of her sons have been killed fighting for the Union cause. Hence the special presidential letter of condolence, which has been hailed as rivaling the Gettysburg Address as an example of Lincoln's simple, moving prose.

Go to the Web site of U.S. Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert and you can read the letter transcribed without commentary. Juxtaposed is a dignified picture of Hastert at a microphone. I

wrote him asking what this Web page meant. Does he firmly support our soldiers staying in Iraq at any cost, no matter how many children our families lose? Does it mean our current losses are trivial when set alongside past sacrifices? Does it imply our current sacrifices are already too much? I received a form letter response thanking me for my support.

Other Web sites use the Bixby letter, too, as did Spielberg's movie, to stir patriotic feelings about "so costly a sacrifice on the altar of freedom." President Lincoln found out about Bixby's terrible tragedy in "a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts in the files of the War Department." Images of what is purported to be the very letter are posted on other Web sites.

Fortunately for us, historians return to primary sources and study them with cautious skepticism. This is a valuable use of archives, great and small. They preserve the past, put us into contact with it, give us a chance to probe it and question it. Archival materials convey the humanity of great people in our past. They can help us resist our tendency to heroize, demonize, mythologize.

In the case of the Bixby letter, its absence from any archives is one clue that something is rotten in Boston — or in the War Department files. The letter apparently was destroyed by Bixby because, as a Confederate sympathizer, she disliked President Lincoln. Existing copies of the letter are forgeries.

Bixby must also have had a cynical laugh at Lincoln's expense. Her grief was profound and real. She had lost children fighting for a cause in which she did not believe. But her sorrow was

not as terrible as Lincoln thought. Only two of her sons had been killed. Of the remaining three, one deserted his unit. Another was captured and then fought for the Confederates.

Stranger still, the Brown University Alumni Magazine for September/October 1999 reports on the work of historian Michael Burlingame, who offers convincing stylistic and testimonial evidence that the letter itself was not written by Lincoln, but by his secretary John Hay, Brown class of 1858.

This is but one of many examples of Web site disinformation that I have recently been studying. Few sites offer proof of their scholarly authority. Some that are highly partisan politically have names that suggest sober and rational neutrality. Many present "information" stripped of interpretive context.

Texas Monthly's October issue has wonderful photographs of archival materials in UT's Humanities Research Center, ranging from Bob Woodward's Watergate notes to a Pablo Picasso postcard. The HRC is a historical treasury, a major archives where truth can be found. Its holdings will figure in Archives Week.

In another column, I'll look at a small archives and some dedicated researchers rescuing a forgotten scholar's monumental achievements and colossal self-sacrifice from oblivion.

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ON THE WEB: For more information on Archives Week, go to www.ischool.utexas.edu/~saa/archivesweek. To read the Bixby letter on Hastert's site, go to speaker.house.gov/library/texts/lincoln/bixby.asp.