

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Letter to Mrs. Bixby

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Page | 1

This letter has gone down in Lincoln lore, yet its origins remain cloudy. To start, it appears that the Mrs. Bixby in question did not actually lose all five of her sons in battle. It was first printed in the Boston Transcript, but no legitimate copy of it survives in Lincoln's handwriting. Nevertheless, its attempts to console a bereft mother were widely celebrated as a succinct summary of the debt owed to the loved ones of the men who fought and died on behalf of their country, and the grievous honor that fell to them.

How does Lincoln, imagining the grief of Mrs. Bixby, choose to speak about her loss? Do you find his words and tone to be fitting? Going sentence by sentence through his remarks, examine each aspect of his attempt at consolation. Next imagine yourself as Mrs. Bixby. Would the letter have any effect, long term, on your feelings of loss? Would the fact that the letter came from the President of the United States make a difference? To what extent can parents who lose children in military service—as opposed, say, to losing them to disease, accident, or gang violence—take comfort, going forward, from the cause for which they gave their lives?

Executive Mansion, Washington, November 21, 1864.

Mrs. Bixby, Boston, Massachusetts:

Dear Madam: I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,
Abraham Lincoln