

The Eagle and the Phoenix

America in times of strength and trial | Pearl Stowers

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At seventeen, I began asking a question that stayed with me: What makes America distinct, and what, if anything, justifies the claim of its greatness? Fourteen years of reading, observation, and reflection have not given me a tidy answer. They have given me two images.

In its stronger seasons, America resembles the eagle: alert, far-seeing, and capable of rising above the immediate moment. Its strength is clearest when liberty is practiced as a discipline rather than displayed as a symbol. Principles must reach the person standing on the ground, not simply decorate the sky.

The Declaration of Independence set a standard of equality and unalienable rights. Its own age did not live that standard equally. That distance between promise and practice matters. A founding ideal becomes meaningful through the generations willing to extend it to those once excluded.

When the eagle must descend

During the Civil War, the country confronted a fracture within itself. At Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln returned to the proposition of equality and to the possibility that government accountable to its people could endure. He spoke at a cemetery. The cost of the contradiction was there before him.

A nation can lose altitude without losing its vocation. Trust can weaken; institutions can protect their own comfort; citizens can grow accustomed to a gap between the words they inherit and the lives their neighbors actually lead. An eagle cannot remain aloft by pretending the current has not changed.

This is where the phoenix becomes useful. Fire is a severe image, and renewal is never painless for the people living through a nation's failures. The phoenix does not promise that suffering is good. It asks whether a people can face what has burned, refuse to conceal the damage, and build more faithfully afterward.

The first flame

America's greatness, if the word is to carry moral weight, cannot mean freedom from error. It must include the capacity to name error, correct it, and widen the circle of people whose dignity counts in practice. That work belongs not only to presidents or courts. It belongs to teachers, families, civil servants, journalists, builders, and citizens who protect a truthful account of what is happening around them.

From outside the United States, I see both the reach of its aspirations and the human cost when it falls short. Criticism need not be contempt. Love of a nation can be serious enough to ask it to keep its own promises.

The eagle is an aspiration: a clear view joined to responsible power. The phoenix is a choice made in darker seasons: to return to principle through honesty, repair, and disciplined hope. Neither image works without people willing to carry the task.

What was entrusted at the beginning was never self-sustaining. Every generation receives a country partly formed and partly unfinished. The first flame is the decision to see it plainly, and to leave it more faithful to its promise than we found it.

Sources and context

Adapted for publication from the author's canonical essay, *The Eagle, the Phoenix, and the First Flame* (2026).

Historical references: National Archives, Declaration of Independence, [archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript](https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript); Library of Congress, Gettysburg Address, [loc.gov/item/2021689291/](https://www.loc.gov/item/2021689291/).