Today we regard America’s relationship with Great Britain as one of the most important and powerful alliances in the history of the world — we call it our “special relationship” — but it was not always this way.

If you took an American History class in high school, you are likely to remember four major inflection points in the Anglo-American dynamic:

- 1776: Independence from Great Britain… Bloody hell!
- 1812: Great Britain burns the Capitol and the White House… Bollocks!
- 1914: World War I… except this time we like Great Britain… Cheers!
• 1941: World War II… and now we’re best mates with Great Britain… Blimey!

But how did these two global superpowers go from staunch geopolitical rivals to the closest of allies? It certainly didn't happen overnight.

In his new book, *Churchill, Roosevelt & Company: Studies in Character and Statecraft*, National Humanities Medal holder Lewis E. Lehrman describes, in a strong narrative and with great precision, the tense diplomatic relationship between the United States and Great Britain in the lead-up to World War II.

Great Britain was unpopular in the U.S. in the years following World War I, having failed to pay its war debt to the United States. Many political and military leaders actively rooted for the dissolution of the British Empire. “Anglophobia”, as Lehrman astutely labeled it, was markedly high.

As we learn from Lehrman’s fascinating work, amidst this tension President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, perhaps the two greatest leaders of the 20th century, formed a close relationship built largely on the mutual understanding that the Nazis posed an existential threat to the free world.

While the dynamic of the Anglo-American relationship was marked by distrust, Churchill, with high statecraft, courted FDR to move America into the Second World War. Thus was created the Anglo-American “special relationship” that has endured ever since, perhaps reaching its apotheosis in the relationship of President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher in their alliance against the USSR.

Behind closed doors, Roosevelt assured Churchill throughout 1940 that American help was on the way. But Roosevelt also had an election to win. He understood that campaigning on the promise of the U.S. fighting another World War could prove politically suicidal. FDR proceeded to make a promise to American mothers and fathers that our “boys” [would not be] sent into any foreign wars.”

Much of Lehrman’s book focuses on the efforts by FDR and some of his associates to either delay or avoid altogether American involvement in World War II. Opposing America’s entry into the war, for instance, was U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain Joseph Kennedy, father of future president John F. Kennedy and future attorney general (and presidential candidate) Robert F. Kennedy. Lehrman tells all.

*Churchill, Roosevelt & Company* provides a flattering portrait of Winston Churchill. While Roosevelt was a consummate politician, always playing to his constituency, Churchill was motivated by one thing only: victory over Hitler and Nazi Germany.

Yet Churchill demonstrates political chops too. Lehrman shows how Churchill spent the entirety of 1940 and 1941 in a herculean effort to build trust with Roosevelt and lobby for American involvement in the war effort. Churchill even went so far as to share sensitive intelligence with the U.S., something for which he was pilloried back home.
Lehrman shows how Churchill understood that the only way to defeat the Nazis would be to bring the United States’ militarily into the war. Churchill was willing to defeat the Nazis at all costs, even if it ultimately meant accepting the cost that the United States would then supplant Great Britain as the dominant power in the West.

This is perhaps the historical detail that most American history classes forget but which Lehrman shrewdly keys in upon: the United States waged war against the Axis powers while also defeating our greatest rival for supremacy, Great Britain. This is the big reveal of Churchill, Roosevelt & Company. The world political order dominating our lives is founded, in part, upon this largely unrecognized fact.

America reluctantly entered World War II to defeat Hitler. America was by no means brimming with enthusiasm and loyalty to Great Britain. While we recognized the Axis powers as a threat — Germany declared war on the United States within days after Pearl Harbor — America also saw the British as our chief rival for world influence. Our statesmen recognized that in winning the war we would solidify American status as the West’s preeminent global superpower.

Lehrman makes it clear to the reader that Churchill also understood the geopolitical price that Great Britain would likely pay for the United States’ entrance into World War II. The price for defeating the Nazis would be the dismantling of the British Empire and America supplanting Great Britain on the world stage.

Thus, the phrase “special relationship” takes on a fair bit of irony. Yes, we share a language and a culture and much history. That is all part of it. But, ultimately, the “special relationship” is a sort of sibling rivalry in which the older sibling (Great Britain), previously in charge of the family business, subordinated itself to their younger sibling (the United States) as we took over.

The romantic story about America’s heroism in World War II, while true, is sadly incomplete without also recognizing Churchill’s statesmanship. Here was a noble Brit who was willing to set aside his intense national pride, recognize what had to be done, and bend his considerable persuasive powers to coax the United States into defeating one of the greatest evils the world has ever known, Nazi Germany. That Churchill likely knew that this victory would come at a great cost to Great Britain makes him exemplary both for character and statecraft. The world would be a very different place were it not for Winston Churchill.

Lehrman demonstrates a jeweler’s eye for detail. He does an excellent job at documenting and capturing personalities, and not only those of Roosevelt and Churchill. He tells the story of a cast of important supporting characters who surrounded the supreme leaders of America and Great Britain. These include important — and colorful! — supporting characters such as Harry Hopkins, Lord Beaverbrook, Dwight David Eisenhower, and many other figures who have entered lore and history. This is a book suffused with human interest.

Lehrman includes excerpts from diaries, memos, and primary historical records of those who supported the Anglo-American alliance and those who opposed it. This work shows, definitively, how the defeat of the Nazis and the Axis Powers was by no means inevitable — an important message, indeed.
Churchill, Roosevelt & Company is a great read. Yes, it explains how the Anglo-American "special relationship" is special, but it also provides many reveals that elucidate our current politics. Most of all, Lehrman, as his subtitle telegraphs, makes a compelling case for how history, then and now, depends on character and statecraft.

Whether or not you have an interest in history, this exceptional work provides powerful lessons for modern politics and for the contemporary world.