For two and a half centuries, the “special relationship” between the United States and Great Britain has had enormous influence on the world stage. It has endured and even thrived through the great challenges of modern history, including the grim battles of World War II, when the U.S.-British alliance became the engine behind a global fight against totalitarianism and fascism. With a snap election on the horizon in Britain, the implications of Brexit unfolding and the Trump-May relationship in its formative days, the lessons of Britain’s shared past with the United States are urgently important.

In his newest work, “Churchill, Roosevelt & Company: Studies in Character and Statecraft” (Stackpole, 2017), historian Lewis E. Lehrman offers deep insights into that remarkable relationship. The volume provides a candid and unvarnished accounting of pivotal moments in the story of the world’s most consequential alliance, going beyond the broad strokes of history into the far more nuanced realities. Lehrman’s portrait is intimate and detailed, telling of the shortcomings and quirks that had a defining impact on the course of history, driving the ups and downs of Anglo-American relations during World War II.

Both Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt were shrewd and inspiring leaders, but their pathways were anything but smooth or linear. Churchill’s peers in British government widely distrusted him. Roosevelt could be capricious, driven by political calculations and indifferent even to credible reports of Communist infiltration of his administration. And both relied heavily on coteries of aides and advisors, who often had agendas of their own.

A deeper dive into the character of the Anglo-American relationship—and the diplomatic, political and military realities that have shaped its evolution—may hold vital clues to the future of this essential alliance. Lehrman performs a significant public service through his powerful analysis of this key moment in history. Mounting evidence shows that many Americans would not recognize the significance of this crucible episode. In the popular imagination, the political leaders and historical events that defined the Greatest Generation are little more than a hazy memory.

In a 2014 survey commissioned by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, more than one in four college graduates could not even identify Franklin Roosevelt as the American president during World War II. More than half couldn’t name Joseph Stalin as a leader of the Yalta Conference, which set the trajectory of post-war Europe.

Indeed, institutions of higher education in the United States are increasingly delinquent on their responsibility of educating students about diplomatic, political and military history—precisely the subjects that would help us to grapple with the most challenging public policy issues of the day.

A mere 18 percent of colleges and universities now require even a single course in American history or government. At top schools, history majors can choose classes centered on topics ranging from zombie films to cigarette smoking to witchcraft—interesting, perhaps, but surely less important than the arc of Allied leadership during World War II and the buildup to the Cold War.

Niall Ferguson, the distinguished historian and senior fellow of the Hoover Institution, has seized on this point: “History departments neglect the defining events of modern world history in favor of topics that are either arcane or agitprop, sometimes both.” As he noted, the data bear him out: Vital sub-disciplines such as diplomatic, legal and constitutional history have each “fallen to less than half of their 1970 shares of the [history] profession.”

The decline of these crucial sub-fields shows exactly why the work of scholars such as Lewis Lehrman is so sorely needed at this moment. Were Churchill alive, he might well quip: “Never has so little been known about so much by so many.”

Today, the West is once again grappling with the rise of aggressive powers and violent, unconventional foes with no respect for international law, and the “special relationship” is being tested yet again. The razor’s edge on which the freedom of the western world stood three-quarters of a century ago offers profound lessons about U.S. and world history. Will we listen?