Friendships That Saved the World

It wasn’t just FDR and Churchill. The prime minister also admired Gen. George Marshall, who he called the “greatest Roman of them all.” Arthur Herman reviews “Churchill, Roosevelt & Company” by Lewis E. Lehrman.

The “special relationship”: Ever since Winston Churchill coined the phrase to describe the alliance between the United States and Great Britain during World War II—an alliance that later became instrumental to founding NATO and sustaining peace during the Cold War—historians, diplomats and politicians have waxed eloquent (and sometimes indignant) about it. The alliance became increasingly asymmetrical as America’s power grew and Britain’s empire declined, and yet—even to this day—it has remained impressively, sometimes movingly, reciprocal.
Lewis Lehrman’s “Churchill, Roosevelt & Company” offers a detailed look at the special relationship, especially during World War II, when Anglo-American cooperation achieved its most impressive results and faced its most formidable challenges. The book is packed with fascinating detail and illuminates not only the past but the challenges of the present day. The subtitle is “Studies in Character and Statecraft”: Mr. Lehrman makes it clear that, in geopolitics, the two go together.

The origins of the special relationship actually go back to World War I, when the Royal Navy and U.S. Navy joined forces to beat the German U-boat menace. Although British statesmen had wanted the U.S. to join the Allied cause early in the war, they felt that, if need be, Britain could sustain itself against Germany without the help of the Americans.

By 1940, however, such strategic independence was no longer possible. When Churchill reached out to FDR that May as Nazi tanks were pouring across France, he knew that Britain couldn’t survive without American help. Even after Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941 and Stalin became Churchill’s unexpected ally, the British prime minister always knew that victory over Hitler depended on the full engagement of the United States.

**PHOTO: WSJ**

**CHURCHILL, ROOSEVELT & COMPANY**

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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Churchill found a willing partner in Franklin Roosevelt. As Mr. Lehrman reminds us, Churchill and FDR saw the world in much the same way—believing that whoever controlled the Atlantic controlled the fate of the U.S. as well as Europe—and both grasped the global stakes if Hitler
prevailed. Even so, it took a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler’s declaration of war four days later to turn America’s material support of the British under Lend-Lease into what Britain desperately needed: an all-out U.S. military commitment.

Of course, relationships other than the one between FDR and Churchill mattered to keeping the alliance up and running through four years of war. There was, for example, the friendship between Churchill and Gen. George Marshall, whom Churchill admiringly called the “greatest Roman of them all,” and between Marshall and Roosevelt: FDR routinely relied on Marshall as Army chief of staff to keep the British, including Churchill, from dominating the strategic proceedings; and Marshall had to rein in a president who, Marshall once grumbled, had “a habit of tossing out new [military] operations” with a wave of his cigarette holder. There was also the friendship that sprang up between Canadian-born William Stephenson, the head of British Security Coordination, and the Wall Street lawyer William Donovan. Mr. Lehrman relates how Stephenson and Churchill, during Donovan’s fact-finding mission for Roosevelt to a besieged Britain in 1940, virtually hand-picked him to head up America’s first extensive intelligence network, a network that blossomed into the Office of Strategic Services and then the CIA.

Donovan turned out to be one of a series of envoys that FDR sent to London to manage policy. None were trained diplomats; all were men who combined high intellectual caliber and strong wills with an unswerving loyalty to their commander in chief. They included the banker Averell Harriman; the Republican politician John Gilbert Winant, who replaced defeatist Joe Kennedy at the Court of St. James’s; and FDR’s most trusted aide, Harry Hopkins. Mr. Lehrman quotes British Gen. Hastings Ismay saying that Hopkins “won the hearts of us all, from the highest to the lowest; he had seen everything. We felt sure that he would report to his chief that we were worth backing to the limit.”

Roosevelt wound up relying on personal envoys largely because his State Department was a disaster. Though Mr. Lehrman doesn’t say so outright, the State Department proved unable to protect American interests even in the midst of crisis, a record it has sustained almost without break ever since. Roosevelt’s secretary of state, Cordell Hull, was anti-British in his instincts, as were other key figures in the administration. Indeed, Churchill, FDR and their supporters had to
overcome a long history of American Anglophobia to keep the alliance going. Mr. Lehrman:
quotes a British officer in 1943: “Some Americans are curiously liable to suspect that they are
going to be ‘outsmarted’ by the subtle British, perhaps because we sometimes do such stupid
things that they cannot take them at face value but suspect them of being part of some dark
design.”

In the end, Mr. Lehrman writes, “Roosevelt and Churchill appointed envoys and military leaders
who worked at close quarters with one another in unprecedented harmony, despite suspicions
and prejudices that some colleagues and countrymen harbored about each other.” It’s hard not to
conclude that building the special relationship was uphill work. Eventually even the relations
between FDR and Churchill grew strained. A sore spot was India, whose indispensable role in
the war against Japan seemed, to the Americans, to earn it the right to independence. FDR’s
meddling on India prompted Churchill to threaten to resign as prime minister—that is, until
Hopkins managed to smooth down the British prime minister’s bristling quills.

All this raises the question of the future of the special relationship in the post-Brexit era.
“There’s only one thing worse than undertaking a war with allies,” Churchill remarked to
Eisenhower just before D-Day. “Waging a war without allies.” Good advice for any president to
keep in mind.

*Mr. Herman’s latest book is “Douglas MacArthur: American Warrior.”*