

A Tale of Two Offensives. Endgames in the Ukraine War?

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The Ukraine War is at a crossroads. It is entering a new phase. Military and political strategies on both sides are in flux. Both Ukraine and Russia have opened new fronts and offensives—Ukraine in the northern Kursk border region and Russia in the Kharkov and central Donbass area of Donetsk. Further new fronts are likely.

It is estimated that Russia's total forces in Ukraine ranges today, late summer 2024, are between 600,000 (per Ukraine) and 700,000 (per Russia Ministry of Defense). Ukraine's total available forces are around 350,000. Behind these numbers, however, both sides are mobilizing further additional forces not yet committed to the line of combat. Ukraine is hurriedly recruiting and training another 150,000 while Russia reportedly has another 400,000 in its total armed forces located elsewhere in Russia. Russia additionally plans to have an army of 1.4 million by year end which suggests additional combat reserves of perhaps 300,000 in addition to its 700,000 combat brigades now in Ukraine.

So Russia today has a roughly 2 to 1 numerical superiority in both combat troops in Ukraine as well as potential reserves. What a Russian force of 700,000 in Ukraine today—and even 1 million by year end—means is that Russia's Special Military Operation (SMO) is simply not a sufficient force to conquer all of Ukraine. Nor was it ever intended to be when Russia in February 2022 entered Ukraine with an SMO combat force of less than 100,000.

With combat forces even at 1m by year end, short of an unlikely total collapse of Ukraine's army, the SMO is not sufficient to take Kiev or Odessa; and it's certainly not sufficient to invade NATO as some war hawks in the west like to argue in order to justify more direct NATO involvement in the war.

By way of historical comparison, it took the Soviet Union a 13 million man army to push the Nazis out of its territory; at least a third or 4 million of which were engaged in its southern Ukrainian front alone.

While Russia has a clear, albeit not overwhelming edge, in combat forces in Ukraine today, military success is not just a function of absolute numbers but of how well forces can be concentrated at a given front to enable a numerical advantage for a time over one's adversary. Other factors play a tactical role as well—like the element of surprise, the quantity and quality of reserves that can be marshalled at critical points and times in the conflict, the mobility of one's forces to be quickly deployed, and the ability to deceive one's opponent as to where, when and how much force will be concentrated.

While important, and even at times decisive, these latter factors (reserves, surprise, mobility, etc.) are nonetheless secondary; concentration of force is always the primary military tactic. And so far we have seen both Ukraine and Russia concentrate their

respective forces, albeit in different fronts separated by hundreds of kilometers. The question is which front is strategically the more important.

The Key Strategic Event of 2024

The key event of the war this summer 2024 is Russia's concentration of numerically and qualitatively superior forces in the central Donbass area. Russia has enjoyed a numerical advantage in combat forces in the Donbass as well as in air superiority and missile-artillery forces for at least the past year since the collapse of Ukraine's summer 2023 offensive. This Russian advantage and superiority in Donbass has been further increased this summer 2024 as result of Ukraine's withdrawal from Donbass this summer of some of its own best brigades. Ukraine sent these best brigades from the Donbass to the north Kursk border region to participate on August 6 in Ukraine's invasion of Russia's Kursk territory. That shift of Ukraine forces left its Donbass front weakly defended. In contrast, Russia has not shifted any of its forces from Donbass to the Kursk front but has increased its forces in Donbass. This event is perhaps the single most important strategic shift in the war this summer 2024.

Which front and offensive—Ukraine's Kursk or Russia's Donbass—is more important for the eventual outcome of the war will likely be decided in the coming months, and definitely before year end 2024.

In the battles now underway in these two fronts—Kursk and Donbass— we may in effect be witnessing the beginning of the endgame of the war in Ukraine.

As result of Ukraine's withdrawals of some of its best brigades from the Donbass, Russian forces are now having increasing success on that front taking village after village and driving west toward the key Ukraine strongholds of Pokrovsk in central Donbass, as well as toward Slavyansk in northern Donbass. Should Russia take Pokrovsk and Slavyansk, the war in eastern Ukraine will be effectively over—at least in those former provinces Lughansk, Donetsk, Zaporozhie and Kherson in eastern Ukraine. The line of combat will almost certainly then move quickly far to the west to the Dnibr river.

In contrast, it's difficult to see what strategically Ukraine hopes to achieve by its penetration into Russia's Kursk province. Will it turn the tide of the war in favor of Ukraine? That is highly unlikely given Russia's continuing advantage in combat forces, weapons and air superiority. Which raises the question: what were Ukraine's motives and objectives for its Kursk offensive and can it attain them?

Ukraine's Kursk Summer Offensive

Image: © Sputnik . Kursk Region Acting Governor Press Office



Launched on August 6, 2024 Ukraine's Kursk offensive has had some initial success. Ukraine initially concentrated numerically superior forces at the Kursk border (as it had earlier in the summer at the Kharkov border southeast of Kursk).

In the run up to its August Kursk offensive, Ukraine publicly announced its troop concentrations opposite Kursk and north of Kharkov city were strictly defensive moves to prepare for expected Russia invasions from the north which were being rumored to be imminent throughout the spring 2024. In hindsight, however, Ukraine's announcement that its forces at the Kharkov and Kursk borders were strictly defensive appears to have been a military deception. Ukraine's military recently revealed that Ukraine had been preparing back in June for an offensive into Russia at Kursk.

The question then arises: what were Ukraine's motives and objectives moving troops from the Donbass and other areas of Ukraine (also from the Belarus-Ukraine border) and concentrating them on its northern Kharkov and Kursk border. If it was not for defense against a new Russian offensive in the north but to launch an offensive of its own, what were (and are) Ukraine's objectives?

In preparation for its Kursk offensive this August, Ukraine transferred combat brigades from all over Ukraine and concentrated them at the Kursk border in July—including many of its best brigades in Donbass as well as some of its 95,000 in defensive positions at the Kharkov border. Ukraine reportedly even moved troops from its Belarus border to Kursk, enabled apparently by an agreement with Belarus to reduce their respective forces from the Belarus-Ukraine border (an agreement that reportedly has been recently rescinded). Finally, Ukraine also rushed some of its new drafted recruits with minimal training to its Kursk region in preparation for the Kursk offensive as well.

In short, Ukraine moved up to a third of its total brigades to the Kursk region. That is probably around 150,000, perhaps half of which are actual combat brigades. A reduced force was left at Vovchansk and a seriously depleted force in the Donbass. In addition, some Ukraine brigades reportedly have returned to the Belarus border since the August offensive.

With an amassed combat force of around 70,000 Ukraine easily overwhelmed Russia's thinly guarded Kursk border which was manned with border guards and other untested units—even though Ukraine invaded Kursk initially with 12,000 or so. Since August 6 it has brought up and concentrated at least another 60,000 or so.

This perhaps suggests Ukraine is not finished with crossing the border into Russia elsewhere along the northern border. Some analysts suggest Ukraine plans to open another offensive further northwest of Kursk in what's called the Bryansk border region. Or alternatively just southwest of Kursk in the Belgorod border. There is even some rumor of another offensive in the far southwest of Zaporozhie province by Ukraine, targeting the taking of the Zaporozhie nuclear power plant currently under Russian control. Where Ukraine might marshal such additional combat forces is debatable, however.

In response, Russia initially brought in special forces and marines to check Ukraine's advance which has slowed significantly. And reportedly mechanized forces are en route to the Kursk front from other locations in Russia. The Kursk pocket has now become perhaps the most intense killing field of the war to date.

What the Kursk and other possible Ukraine offensives and fronts suggests is that Ukraine is

desperate to get Russia to shift its superior and increasingly effective forces from the Donbass in order to slow Russia's accelerating advances there. But so far it appears Russia has not done so.

Russia's Kharkov-Vovchansk Offensive

There's another parallel story here: Before Ukraine's August offensive into Kursk, Russian forces in early May had entered Ukraine's Kharkov province near the Ukrainian border city of Vovchansk located just 25 miles north of Ukraine's second largest city of Kharkov. That Russian offensive was launched with a small force of only 15-20,000 even though Russia knew Ukraine had concentrated 95,000 troops in a defensive line just south of the border. The result was predictable: the Russian offensive into Kharkov became quickly bogged down and a stalemate resulted there around the city of Vovchansk, at least until very recently.

A second parallel question therefore arises: why did Russia cross the border near Kharkov-Vovchansk with such an insufficient concentration of forces, facing off against what it knew were reportedly 95,000 Ukrainian troops dug in defensive positions? Clearly the objective could not have been to take Kharkov city. So then what was it?

Russia's Donbass Offensive

The most important strategic military development this summer 2024 in the war is not Ukraine's invasion at Kursk. It is that to enable its Kursk offensive Ukraine has left its Donbass front seriously weakened. So weak in fact that Russia's offensive in the Donbass is intensifying almost daily with growing success.

Image: A Ukrainian soldier adds wood to a fire to stave off the bitter cold, Bakhmut, Donbass (File photo)



There are three directions in which Russia is driving west in the Donbass. The most important is the central Donbass where Russia is virtually at the gates of the strategic hub Ukrainian city of Pokrovsk. Pokrovsk is a railway and road intersection that feeds Ukraine forces most of its weapons and supplies to central and southern Donbass. If it falls to Russia supplies to most of its forces in central Donbass are at great risk. Equally important, west of Pokrovsk there are few lines and fortifications for Ukraine defense operations. The road is open to the Dnipro river to the far west, the next natural line of defense by Ukraine. But the Dnipro represents the loss of all of Donetsk province and its complete liberation by Russia.

Just further north of Pokrovsk lies a similarly strategic city of Slavyansk and its neighboring largest city of Kramatorsk. Slavyansk is the analog in terms of Ukraine logistical support for

the northern Donbass. If it too falls so to does all of the remainder of northern Donetsk and Luhansk province. Russian advances have also begun in this region, through Siversk and Izyum.

In short, if Pokrovsk and Slavyansk fall to Russia it's game over in the Donbass front to Ukraine. Russia advances suggest this is likely before the US November elections or soon after. The point is Ukraine's withdrawal of some of its best forces from Donbass, to its Kursk front, as no doubt accelerated Russia's gains now underway in the Donbass. And if Donbass falls, Ukraine has no choice but to exit its positions further south at the Zaporozhie border as well, or else be encircled there.

The events in recent months in Donbass thus raises yet a third strategic question: Has Ukraine effectively decided to sacrifice the Donbass in order to launch its Kursk offensive?

Military analysts on both sides seem uncertain as to why Ukraine and Russia have made the decisions they have at this critical juncture of the war in summer 2024—Russia last May in Kharkov, Ukraine this summer in Donbass and Kursk, and Russia's decision to hold firm to its offensive in Donbass.

So what are some of the possible explanations being bandied about by analysts trying to explain these objectives of these two offensives—Ukraine in Kursk and Russia in Kharkov-Donbass?

Some Unanswered Strategic Questions:

Let's summarize these strategic questions and offer some possible answers.

Question 1. Why Did Ukraine Invade Kursk, what are its possible objectives, and can it attain those objectives:

Military analysts are all over the map with speculation as to why Ukraine invaded Kursk. Some say the objective was seize the Russian nuclear power plant located just south of the city of Kursk and less than 100 miles from the border. By seizing the plant Ukraine would then use it as a blackmail piece in negotiations with Russia.

Another objective raised is that Ukraine intends to use the territory captured as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Russia, which it appears several third party countries have been trying to arrange—albeit thus far without success.

In terms of military tactics, still another speculation goes, the Ukrainian invasion was intended to force Russia to transfer brigades from its Donbass front to Kursk, and thereby slow down Russia's advances in the Donbass that appear to be accelerating.

Yet another speculation is Ukraine intended to create a 'buffer' zone along the border before Russia launched its own offensive into Ukraine in the region. That suggests the Ukrainian invasion was to pre-empt Russia opening an offensive front of its own along the northern border.

Another view is that the true objective of Ukraine's offensive has been to make Putin appear weak to Russian elites and public who are now demanding a more aggressive Russian response to the invasion. The Kursk offensive, according to this view, is to provoke Russia to a more extreme aggressive response that would enable Zelensky to receive more lethal

military aid from NATO—like US Storm Shadow and US ATACMS missiles and missile carrying F-16s—and NATO permission to use them to attack deep inside Russia.

It is possible that a little of all the above are motivations for Ukraine's offensive: So far as seizing the Kursk nuclear plant is concerned, if that were the objective it has been neutralized and Ukraine has virtually no chance of reaching the Kursk plant any longer now that massive Russian defenses now block its path.

The explanation that the Kursk offensive's objective is to force Russia to move military units from Donbass to Kursk has also apparently failed to date. Russia has sufficient reserves elsewhere in Russia proper and is moving those to the Kursk front.

The speculation that Zelensky authorized the Kursk offensive as a 'land for land' bargaining chip in future negotiations is also negated by recent events since August 6: Putin has publicly stated there will be no negotiations with Ukraine so long as its forces remain on Russian territory, whether in Kursk or Donbass.

The idea of Ukraine obtaining a buffer has never been convincing. Why would Ukraine deplete its military resources elsewhere and risk losing more territory (Donbass) in order to protect territory (North Border) it hadn't even lost yet?

It seems therefore that the most likely objective of the Ukraine Kursk offensive was, and remains, political: to provoke Russia into an extreme response in order for Ukraine to restore fading western support for Ukraine to continue the war. Zelensky needs Russia to escalate to remain in power in Ukraine. Throughout NATO, support is waning for providing military arms and ammunition. The west further believes that funding Ukraine's war and economy is settled, provided by the seized \$300 billion of Russian assets. However, Western Media almost daily has become increasingly critical of the war, recognizing it cannot be won. Zelensky thus needs to show Ukraine still has the ability to fight and NATO needs to provide even more weaponry because Russia is escalating the war! Zelensky realizes he needs more direct NATO troop involvement—not just weaponry. Currently NATO is participating in ground operations with technicians operating advanced NATO weapons, mercenaries, as well as senior NATO officers and war planners on the ground. It will need even more. It can't impress NATO to provide more by losses in the Donbass. It might convince NATO war hawks by offensives into Russia like Kursk.

2. Has Ukraine effectively decided to sacrifice Donbass?

Evidence on the ground strongly suggests Ukraine may have decided to sacrifice territory in the Donbass and perhaps the entire region altogether. Its Donbass defense was beginning to crack well before the Kursk offensive, ever since loss of the strategic Donbass city of Avdeyevka earlier this year. Now losses there are accelerating after Ukraine pulled some of its best brigades from Donbass and moved them to Kursk.

For Ukraine, the northern Kursk front is strategically more important than Donbass. Its bargaining position in eventual future negotiations with Russia and western support in general was weakening so long as it was losing Donbass. Seizing Russian territory in the north might shore up that loss of support and strengthen its position. In short, protecting Kharkov city and Ukraine territory outside Russia's four provinces in the east is strategically more important to Ukraine than holding on to the Donbass. Ukraine can't hold onto the Donbass in the end and NATO and Ukraine both knows it. Opinion in the west increasingly

suggests Ukraine should agree to give it Donbass and the four provinces. But Ukraine cannot simply retreat in the Donbass and give it up without appearing weak and even about to lose the war. That would accelerate NATO withdrawal of support. Zelensky therefore needed another success elsewhere if Ukraine was inevitably about to lose Donbass. Thus the Kursk offensive.

3. Why did Russia invade Kharkov region with an insufficient force?

Russia crossed over the border early last May in the Kharkov region but not to capture the large Ukraine city of Kharkov. That would take perhaps a Russian offensive force of at least half a million. Russia obviously knew, moreover, that a large Ukrainian force of up to 95,000 per reports was concentrated between the border and Kharkov city itself barely 50 miles away to the south. So why then did Russia open that front with only 15-20,000 troops? The only possible explanation is Russia entered Kharkov with an insufficient force to get Ukraine to withdraw forces from the Donbass to protect Kharkov, which it did. Otherwise the explanation for throwing a force of 15,000 at 90,000 was military folly. And there's no evidence throughout the war Russia has been militarily foolish in its offensive force deployments.

4. Did Russia get caught by surprise by the Kursk invasion?

It has to be admitted Russia was clearly caught off guard by Ukraine's Kursk offensive. It might have been misled by Ukraine's deception that its amassing of forces on the Ukraine side of the Kursk border in the summer was strictly defensive, designed to confront Russia should it have itself invaded at that location. It is also possible Russia may have viewed US/NATO limitations to date on Ukraine's use of ATACMS and cruise missiles to attack deep inside Russia as evidence Ukraine was not allowed by NATO/US to escalate attacks directly into Russia. Before August 6 Ukraine's attacking inside Russia was limited to Ukrainian drones. Russia may have interpreted these NATO limits meant Ukraine would not be given the 'green light' to cross the Russian border with large ground forces. This—combined with Russia misreading Ukraine's concentration of forces on its side of the border as only defensive—may have led Russia to erroneously assume Ukraine would not mount an offensive into Kursk.

5. Are we witnessing the growing importance of reserves in the war?

As the war now has passed its two and a half year mark, it is clearly beginning to wear on both sides in terms of men and materiel. The availability of sufficient reserves is therefore beginning to play a relatively more important role as the war has continued. Not just reserves in the sense of the number of available combat troops but their combat experience, training, and availability of weapons and ammunition are becoming an increasingly critical factor in the conduct of the war. This is often the case in war as the conflict becomes protracted, except when one side has an overwhelming force advantage of the other. That may have been the case in US wars in Iraq, Libya, Yugoslavia, Panama, and elsewhere. But it wasn't in Viet Nam and it isn't in Ukraine. Here Russia's longer term advantage in reserves has begun to show.

It is true Russia in refusing to move reserves from Donbass has had to commit reserves from elsewhere in Russia but it has such reserves. Ukraine does not. The Kursk offensive shows Ukraine has probably committed most of its remaining reserves to that front. And it had to move brigades from Belarus, Kharkov and Donbass for the Kursk offensive—and to

cut short training of new drafted recruits. Ukraine is approaching the end of its human reserves and cannot get an increase in weapons and ammunition from NATO that it requires if the war intensifies, as it is now, in both Kursk and Donbass. NATO has arranged continued funding for Ukraine throughout 2025 by seizing Russia's \$300B assets in G7 banks that were frozen at the outset of the war. NATO's provision of weapons is slowing, moreover, as NATO inventories are drying up; it can no longer accelerate the delivery of weapons to Ukraine as it did in 2022-23. Nor politically does NATO have the will to provide soldiers on the ground directly into Ukraine, although it is building the largest military and air base in NATO now in eastern Romania within tens of miles from Odessa where it already has stationed thousands of French and US airborne troops. If NATO does intervene ever on the ground it will most likely be to prevent Russia seizure of the critical Ukraine seaport of Odessa, without which even a rump state of Ukraine in the west cannot be sustained.

5. What are Russia's strategic options with regard to the Kursk invasion? Its Donbass Offensive?

Russian strategy will not change much in the Donbass. It will continue to advance, likely even more rapidly. Ukraine's forces in Donbass may even collapse there before year end, with Ukraine retreating west to the Dnipro river and thus abandoning any hold on territory that comprises Russia's four provinces. As for the Kursk front, Russia will most likely seal off the currently occupying Ukrainian force, bring up new Russian armored division, artillery and air forces and continue to batter those Ukrainian forces in the pocket until they weaken and retreat of their own accord. That will likely happen soon after the US November elections. Ukraine will try to hold on to Kursk to try to ensure further US support before Biden leaves office next January. The odds are significant, however, it will not be able to succeed in that.

Political Consequences of the Kursk-Donbass Offensives

Public opinion in Russia has strengthened Putin's hand in the war as a consequence of the two offensives. His problem now is not ensuring Russian public opinion continues to support his government and the SMO but that growing segments of Russian opinion and Russian media are now demanding he take even more aggressive military action in response to the Kursk invasion.

Putin's challenge now is to not fall for Ukraine's Kursk provocation, abandon the SMO and escalate the conflict to an even more intensive and wider war invading that would require a much larger military force than the SMO and falling into the NATO war hawks trap to use a Russian escalation as an excuse to get NATO even more directly involved on the ground in the war than it already is.

Zelensky clearly wants to maneuver events into that direction—i.e. a more direct Russia-NATO conflict. That's perhaps the major rationale behind the Kursk offensive. But Putin ultimately wants some kind of negotiated settlement, albeit on Russia's two terms announced earlier this summer. He will therefore likely wait until the outcome of US elections to determine whether abandoning the SMO for a larger conflict is necessary. Zelensky and Ukraine leadership is desperate and reckless; Putin is calculating and typically factors in the bigger political picture.

For the moment, however, Putin's conditions for beginning negotiations announced a couple months ago—i.e. Ukraine leave the four provinces and agree to neutrality—is off the table. Scuttling the possibility of negotiations (that China was trying to arrange last July) may have

also been part of the objective of Ukraine's Kursk offensive. Ukraine and Zelensky have a long track record of feigning interest in negotiations as a cover for an escalation planned. Ukraine diplomatic maneuvers in Beijing in July and in Qatar in August are evidence Ukraine has no intention of seriously negotiating anything. Quite the contrary. Although nothing is imminent, US and Russia may continue exploring the possibility of negotiations through back channels, as they have in recent months, but it's clear there will be no negotiations of any kind until after the US elections at earliest and more likely not until the Biden administration ends next January 20, 2025.

Throughout the summer opinion has been growing among NATO elites and western media that Ukraine cannot hold onto the Donbass or even the four provinces annexed in 2022 by Russia. Russia's continuing successes in the Donbass offensive further confirm that view, and solidify it should Russia take Pokrovsk next month. Conversely, NATO elite opinion may shift further toward allowing Ukraine to attack inside Russia using ATACMS, cruise missiles, and even F-16s to enable Ukraine to hold onto the Kursk territory as Ukraine loses the Donbass. The test of this NATO elites' shift will be evident should US allow in coming weeks further shipments of UK storm shadow cruise missiles to Ukraine. Losing the Donbass logically means rolling the military dice even further in Kursk and the northern border.



Russian tanks in the Donbas after crossing the Siverskyi Donets with pontoon bridges, April 2022
(Licensed under CC BY 4.0)

US neocons and war hawks will attempt to create further escalation in the Ukraine war between now and January 2025 in order to make it extremely difficult for any new US president elected in November to reduce US/NATO commitments to Ukraine, let alone withdraw.

Should Harris win in November, the Biden administration policies toward the war will almost certainly continue. Harris will be malleable to the foreign policy/neocon establishment who have been running US foreign policy and wars since at least 2001 and perhaps even earlier since the late 1990s. Should Trump win—and the Deep State allow him to actually take office in January without a major US constitutional crisis (which is more likely than not)—it is unlikely that Trump will be able to end the Ukraine war in the short run after taking office January 20. Even with Trump in office, the war will therefore continue well into 2025. The only factor that may expedite an earlier end to the war is if Russia debilitates Ukraine military resources to such an extent that those forces effectively collapse in both the Donbass and Kursk fronts.

Russia has never intended to 'conquer' all of Ukraine, including Kiev. Putin's SMO has always been to drive Ukrainian forces out of the Russian speaking provinces and then ensure some kind of neutrality by what's left of a Ukrainian state.

But before that can happen Russia will need to conclusively drive Ukraine back across the border from Kursk and take the strategic Donbass cities of Pokrovsk and Slavyansk. Only then is Endgame apparent. Only then will Ukraine forces retreat back to whatever remains of Ukraine. Only then will US/NATO decide to cut losses and abandon the 'Ukraine Project' altogether.

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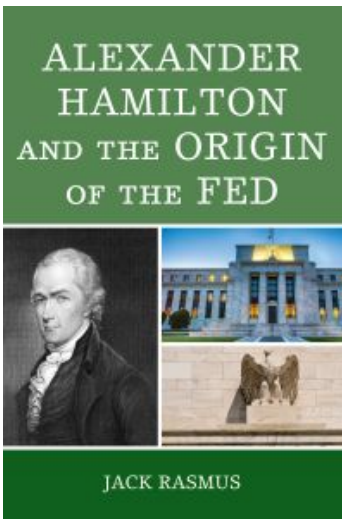
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Featured image: Residential building in Avdiivka city (Donetsk region of Ukraine) after Russian shelling and airstrikes on the city on 17 March 2023 (Licensed under CC BY 4.0)



Alexander Hamilton and the Origins of the Fed

By Jack Rasmus

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Alexander Hamilton and the Origins of the Fed describes how US federal governments, often in cooperation with the largest US private banks, introduced and expanded central banking functions from 1781 through the creation of the Federal Reserve Act of 1913. Based on an analysis of the evolution of the US banking system – from pre-1781, through the 1787 US Constitutional Convention, Congressional debates on Hamilton’s reports to Congress, the rise and fall of the 1st and 2nd Banks of the United States, and through the long period of the National Banking System form 1862-1913, the book shows how central banking in the US evolved out of the private banking system, and how following the financial crash of 1907 big New York banks pushed through Congress the Federal Reserve Act of 1913, creating a central bank which they then managed for their interests.

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