



National Duties: Custom Houses and the Making of the American State (American Beginnings, 1500-1900)

Gautham Rao

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In the wake of the American Revolution, if you had asked a citizen whether his fledgling state would survive more than two centuries, the answer would have been far from confident. The problem, as is so often the case, was money. Left millions of dollars of debt by the war, the nascent federal government created a system of taxes on imported goods and installed custom houses at the nation's ports, which were charged with collecting these fees. Gradually, the houses amassed enough revenue from import merchants to stabilize the new government. But, as the fragile United States was dependent on this same revenue, the merchants at the same time gained outsized influence over the daily affairs of the custom houses. As the United States tried to police this commerce in the early nineteenth century, the merchants' stranglehold on custom house governance proved to be formidable.

In *National Duties*, Gautham Rao makes the case that the origins of the federal government and the modern American state lie in these conflicts at government custom houses between the American Revolution and the presidency of Andrew Jackson. He argues that the contours of the government emerged from the push-and-pull between these groups, with commercial interests gradually losing power to the administrative state, which only continued to grow and lives on today.

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