

The New Historiography of the Early Federal Government: Institutions, Contexts, and the Imperial State

By Gautham Rao

Over the last several decades, scholars have brought the state “back in” to the study of American history. Early American historians in particular have examined federal governmental institutions to establish the strength and vigor of the national government, which had previously been dismissed as weak and statistically insignificant. The maturity and sophistication of this literature is clear, yet alternative approaches can further develop our understanding of the early federal government and the American state. In particular, by studying governmental authority and power from the perspective of those officeholders and persons who experienced it, scholars can more fully appreciate the complicated role of the state in early America. Indigenous people’s interactions with the early federal government furnish one powerful example. Their acts of negotiation, contestation, and more suggest that the early federal governmental institutions and officers operated in a manner reminiscent of the British Empire in the mid- to late eighteenth century. The idea of an “imperial state” might therefore be a useful way to understand statecraft in the early United States.