Conclusion

This book followed the development of the Dutch state from its origins in the sixteenth century Dutch Revolt to its structural crisis and eventual collapse in the Batavian Revolution of the final years of the eighteenth century. It has examined the question why in the Dutch Republic brokerage structures, in which independent capitalist investors fulfilled state-like tasks on their own account and for a profit, retained their centrality in the organisation of warfare. It has used this question as a key to a larger riddle: how it was possible that a federal state that parcelled out many of its warring functions, so unlike the dominant image of a great power, could play a central role in the early modern state system for so long. Or, posed from the opposite end, why sustained involvement in warfare did not lead to fundamental transformations in the structure of the state in a direction more similar to the ideal type of centralised, concentrated power associated with the modern nation state. Answers to these questions were based on an investigation of the forms and networks of interaction between the state and capitalists in specific areas of the organisation of warfare, and were arrived at by putting these interactions in their wider institutional contexts.

War is considered the great leveller in state formation. In successive waves of reorganisation early modern rulers introduced and reformed bureaucratic institutions to meet the spiralling costs for the maintenance of large standing armies and navies, the challenges posed by logistics on an increased scale, and the global expansion of the theatres of conflict. All of these tasks required close cooperation between state officials and those social classes in control of society’s economic resources. Starting from Charles Tilly’s famous dictum that ‘war makes states, and states make war’, historians have long assumed that the intense military competition of the early modern period inherently favoured the rise of centralised, bureaucratic states that became more and more reliant on impersonal markets to fulfil their martial aims. The ensuing replacement of ‘brokerage’ structures, in which independent entrepreneurs were responsible for the organisation of violence, by national bureaucracies in which the state took those tasks directly in its own hands, forms a powerful narrative of modernisation. The Dutch Republic of the seventeenth and eighteenth century figures in this narrative either as trailblazer or as false start. The economic success of its seventeenth-century ‘Golden Age’ allowed this small federal state a short bout as hegemonic power within the emerging capitalist world economy. But once faced with determined competition from successful ‘nationalising’ states, it allegedly was easily pushed aside, undergoing stagnation and eventually decline.
This book has presented a different story. Without denying the great impact of military conflict on state formation, it has shown that the pressures of warfare did not singularly push competing states onto converging paths. It questions the idea that military conflict in the early modern period by definition favoured national, centralised, and bureaucratic states. It has shown how in the case of the Dutch Republic, federal and brokerage arrangements for the organisation of violence at the heart of the state were strengthened, not weakened, by engagement in European great-power competition. These forms of organisation persisted because of their great success in mobilising the enormous wealth in Dutch society for the production of power. Albeit at a somewhat lower level than during the seventeenth century, brokerage forms of organisation allowed the Dutch Republic to continue functioning as a great power during much of the eighteenth century. The crisis that enveloped the state in its final decades did not stem from any significant failure of brokerage structures to fulfil the specific tasks for which they were designed, and the changing role of the Dutch Republic in the international state system did not flow directly from structural incapacies of the brokerage model of its fiscal-military and naval structures.

Breaking with the teleological overtones of the traditional narrative of state-modernisation, this study has argued that ‘brokerage’ was not a sharply delineated phase in state-formation that for the more successful states ended somewhere around the year 1700, as was assumed by Tilly and much of the literature on the ‘military revolutions’, but rather continued to function as one of the solutions to which all early modern rulers continued to resort until well into the eighteenth century, in order to solve their problems in the practical organisation of warfare. The continued reliance on independent capitalist suppliers of the means of violence did not itself make the Dutch Republic exceptional. Most of the recent literature on early modern warfare stresses the limits of eighteenth-century nationalisation even for some of the most ‘absolutist’ states. State reliance on military entrepreneurship in the eighteenth century was not simply a hangover from a by then superseded phase in bureaucratic development. It remained a central aspect of the organisation of warfare across the board. Differences between states did not arise from their reliance on brokerage forms of organisation per se, but from the manner in which forms of brokerage were integrated into the overall structure of the state. In societies in which capitalist social structures were more marginalised, like Habsburg Spain or Bourbon France, the crown always remained the final arbiter in the employment of entrepreneurs, restraining capitalist development at the same time as relying on it. In societies in which capitalism did attain more developed forms, like the Dutch Republic and England, bureaucrats and capitalists interacted on a much more equal footing.