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America in Southeast Asia before the 'Pivot': The 'Battle of Quallah Battoo' in 1832

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ABSTRACT

Today, there is much talk about the 'American pivot' back to Southeast Asia, and the role that America continues to play in terms of the geo-strategic relations between the countries in the region. That America has been a player in Southeast Asian affairs is well-known, as America's presence in countries like Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam has been well documented since the Cold War. However, there has been less scholarship devoted to America's role in Southeast Asia prior to the 20th century, lending the impression that the United States is a latecomer as far as Southeast Asian affairs is concerned.

This paper looks at a particular incident – the First Sumatran expedition of 1832 – where America played a visible role in the policing of the waters off Sumatra. Though the event has been largely forgotten today, and is not even mentioned in Indonesian history books, it was important for it marked America's arrival – first as a trading nation, and later as a policing power – to the region. Drawing upon contemporary sources, the paper looks at how and why the expedition was launched, and the response of the American public in its wake. It tells us something about American public perception then, and how Americans were then divided over the role that America should play in Asian affairs.

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I. Introduction: Holding back the bayonet - The woman in the picture



Source: Edward S. Ellis, *The History of Our Country the United States*, 1898, p. 751.

Today the name Kuala Batee¹ is hardly known to scholars, save those who have studied the history and society of the province of Aceh, North Sumatra. For more than thirty years, Aceh's contribution to news headlines came in the form of a long-drawn and bloody separatist struggle led by the Free Aceh Movement (GAM, *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*), and later the Tsunami that devastated the province's coastline in 2004. With the signing of the Helsinki peace accord between GAM and the Indonesian government in 2005, Aceh has been given relative autonomy and has slipped off the radar, so to speak. Indonesia's history books mention the Aceh war between the Dutch and the kingdom of Aceh, and tell us about the huge human cost of that conflict. But even in the history books of Indonesia there is little mention of Kuala Batee, and what had happened there in 1831-1832, which set in motion a chain of events that led to the First Sumatran expedition of 1832 and America's intervention in local affairs, which in turn provided the Dutch with the justification for further involvement in local politics in North Sumatra.

¹ A note on the spelling of Kuala Batee: Today the locality is referred to as 'Kuala Batee' and is spelled thus in signs and maps. There are, however, local Indonesian sources that refer to the place as 'Kuala Bate', 'Kuala Batee' and 'Kuala Batu'. American sources of the period refer to it as 'Quallah Battoo'. For the sake of consistency I have chosen the spelling 'Kuala Batee' in most cases, but have retained the spelling 'Quallah Battoo' whenever it appears in American publications.

The focus of this paper is the so-called 'Battle of Quallah Battoo', a relatively remote and forgotten small action that turned out to have larger consequences and ramifications. In the course of this paper we intend to re-visit the events that led to the military intervention, consider the complex reaction of the American press and public whose opinion was then divided over the correctness of the course taken, and look at what the event tells us about America's perception of itself as an emerging maritime power in Asia. Owing to the fact that little has been written about the event over the past century, we will turn to contemporary accounts of the event as they unfolded then. We begin with a curious vignette that appears in a history book that paints a picture of the clash in somewhat exotic hue.

On page 751 in chapter 49 of volume three of the 1898 edition of Edward S. Ellis' *The History of Our Country the United States*, the reader will find a reproduction of a painting by J. Carter Beard. Entitled *The Battle of Quallah Battoo*, it is an interesting depiction of one of America's first military adventures in maritime Southeast Asia, which took place at the coastal settlement of Kuala Batee, in Southwest Aceh. Seven decades before America's intervention in the Philippines, the battle of Kuala Batee was one of the very first violent encounters between the United States and the kingdoms of Southeast Asia.

Beard's painting, though somewhat fanciful, offers a rare glimpse into what took place in the North Sumatran settlement decades before. At the centre of the action is a somewhat dramatic encounter between an American bluejacket, rifle in hand, about to bayonet a fallen Sumatran adversary. In the bottom foreground lies the body of another bluejacket, though it is unclear as to whether he has been killed or simply injured. Standing between the attacking bluejacket and the Sumatran warrior who holds his sword aloft is a the figure of a Sumatran woman, who steals the attention of the viewer by her dramatic gesture of gripping the American soldier's bayonet with both hands, preventing him from going for the kill. In the background, palisades that are being scaled by two other American soldiers can be seen.

The painting "*The Battle of Quallah Battoo*" has been all but forgotten by military and naval historians, and it is not certain where the original is presently housed. But the fact that it was later reproduced in Ellis' 1898 edition of the "*History of the United States*", more than six decades after the event, may suggest the importance of the encounter then.² (Ellis evidently thought so, and included it as one of the pivotal events in chapter 49 of his book, covering the Jacksonian Presidency.) Why was this

² The incident was described in Ellis' narrative thus: "In 1832 Andrew Jackson was the President of the United States and Levi Woodbury was Secretary of the Navy. It took several months to bring intelligence of the outrage (referring to the attack on the merchant ship *Friendship*) to our government, but then the news arrived at last, and 'something was done'. On the 9 August, Commodore John Downes, of the United States Frigate *Potomac*, was ordered to repair without delay to Sumatra, by way of the Cape of Good Hope... Upon arriving at Quallah Battoo, he was directed to take such steps as would give him the fullest and most accurate information not only concerning the outrage but the character of the government. It was impressed upon Commodore Downes that he was to use utmost care, tact and delicacy to prevent any injustice or mistake. From the proper authorities he was to demand the restoration of stolen property or indemnity thereof, and the prompt punishment of the murderers of the crew of the *Friendship*. If those demands were refused, Commodore Downes was instructed to do his utmost to seize the murderers and send them to Washington for trial as pirates, to retake the property of the *Friendship*, to destroy boats and vessels of any kind engaged in piracy, and the forts and dwellings near the scene of the outrage." (Re: Edward S. Ellis, *The History of Our Country*, J. H. Woolling and Company, Indianapolis, 1898. Vol. 3, p. 750.)

relatively minor event made the subject of paintings and included in history books then? Who was the soldier in the painting, and who was the woman whose dramatic gesture had captured the imagination of the painter Carter Beard?

The Kuala Batee incident was, in fact, a turning point in American naval activity in maritime Southeast Asia, and it preceded America's later naval activities in the region by more than half a century. But it took place at a time when America was a relatively new player in the geopolitical manoeuvrings of Western powers in Southeast Asia, and long before both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia had been effectively colonised and cut apart by the other powers of Western Europe: The British had only recently annexed parts of Burma's coastline (Arakan and Tenneserim after the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824-1826), just created the Straits Settlements of Penang, Singapore and Malacca (in 1826) and had signed their treaties with Holland³ (1824) and Siam⁴ (1826) that would compartmentalise the region into neat blocks. Britain, the Netherlands, Spain and France had yet to consolidate and expand their power across Southeast Asia, and Sumatra had yet to experience direct colonial intervention by the Dutch.

It was within this fluid context of shifting and emerging powers that America took its first tentative steps into the complex world of Southeast Asia, initially as a trading power and later as a more aggressive power that would demonstrate its willingness to defend its commercial interest by force. However, that forceful reaction was not without its critics back home, and as we shall see later in this paper, the Kuala Batee incident would lead to a long-drawn and at times acrimonious debate back in America about America's role and intentions in Asia.

The aim of this paper is to look at how the Kuala Batee incident was received and reported by the press back in the United States of America, and how it came to occupy the attention of politicians, newspaper editors, columnists, artists and those who actually took part in the attack on the settlement. It will argue that in the early 19th century military adventurism in other parts of the world did not go unnoticed, and that those who were directly involved would often find themselves compelled to answer queries and accusations that were let loose in the unregulated court of public opinion. This is a reminder for those who may mistakenly believe that 19th century Western colonial adventurism was without its critics back home: For as the Kuala Batee incident – and the subsequent public reaction – demonstrate, it is not entirely true to suggest that Western colonial expansionism was always met with a positive response back in the Western world.

³ The 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty drew a line along the Straits of Malacca and divided Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula into Dutch and British-controlled territories, respectively. Local trade between the Peninsula and Sumatra was subsequently controlled and limited. [See: Lee Kam Hing, *The Sultanate of Aceh: Relations with the British 1760-1824*. Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1995.]

⁴ In 1826 the British colonial authorities signed a treaty with Siam (Thailand) to ensure that Thai forces would not venture south of the northern Malay states of Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah. Although the British did not formally accept Siam's claims over the Malay kingdoms of Patani, Kedah (renamed Muang Saiburi by the Siamese), Kelantan and Terengganu as its vassals, they did not intervene in its expansionist moves. As a result of the 1826 treaty, the Malays of Kedah were forced to rely on themselves and their allies from the other Malay kingdoms. In 1832, the Sultans of Kelantan and Terengganu sent their troops to help Patani in its revolt against the Siamese. With the tide of war turning against them, the Siamese called upon the British to honour their commitments in the treaty and help them defeat the Malays. In 1838, the British navy enforced a blockade on Kedah, as part of its obligations under the Anglo-Siamese Treaty. In 1842, the British finally intervened in Kedah by restoring Sultan Ahmad to the throne.

But before elaborating any further, we begin with a quick overview of the events that led to the Quallah Battoo attack, and the despatch of the USS *Potomac* to the waters off Sumatra...

II. Here's pepper in your eye: The attack on the American merchantman *Friendship*, 1831

The attack on the North Sumatran coastal settlement of Kuala Batee was in fact an act of reprisal, done for the sake of delivering a stern message after an earlier attack on an American merchant ship, the *Friendship*, which took place a year earlier. Kuala Batee lies 3 degrees 44' north and 96 degrees 56' east on the island of Sumatra, and in the 1830s was a small polity in its own right, quite independent of the larger and better-known kingdom of Aceh.⁵

In 1831, the *Friendship* was plying the western coastline of Aceh, North Sumatra, in search of pepper. Aceh had engaged in the pepper trade with many Western countries including Britain, Holland, France, Denmark and Spain since the 17th century, developing a reputation as the world's biggest exporter of pepper. At the northern point of the island of Sumatra was the kingdom of Aceh, which also happened to be a powerful local Southeast Asian polity that had close relations with other major Muslim powers, including the Ottoman Porte in Istanbul.

However, Aceh's power had begun to decline visibly by the early 19th century, giving rise to new, smaller polities that likewise traded pepper with foreigners along the Sumatran coast. One of these was the relatively obscure settlement of Kuala Batee that was under the rule of several local chieftains who maintained cordial relations with the court of Aceh.

In February 1831, the American merchant ship *Friendship* had landed close to Kuala Batee with the intention of buying a large cargo of pepper. On 7 February, the *Friendship's* captain Charles Endicott and a small group of sailors landed at Kuala Batee to negotiate for a large purchase of pepper. While the captain and his men were ashore, a small contingent of men from Kuala Batee boarded the *Friendship* and attacked its crew, killing the first officer and two crew members and capturing the ship. Captain Endicott and his men were then forced to seek the help of some local Malays, including a local leader called Pak Adam, who helped them make contact with other Western ships in the vicinity, and eventually regain control of the *Friendship*. With its mission a failure, the *Friendship* then set sail back for Salem, Massachusetts, where eventually news of the attack on the merchant vessel broke out. It was this attack on the *Friendship* that set into motion the chain of events that would eventually involve the captain and crew of the USS *Potomac*, the President of the United States, the American navy and both sides of the Congress.

When news of the attack on the *Friendship* reached America, it was met with anger and outrage: American media highlighted the fact that an unarmed American trading vessel had been boarded, its crew killed, and that the ship was momentarily captured by the Sumatrans. The *Friendship* belonged

⁵ Reynolds, 1835. p. 533.

to the company of Silsbee, Pickman and Stone, and here other domestic political and economic considerations came into play. Nathaniel Silsbee was one of the owners of the *Friendship* and he was also then a senator belonging to the Republican Party.⁶ Robert Stone and Andrew Dunlop who were also owners of the merchant ship were on friendly terms with President Andrew Jackson, but on the subject of their ship being taken hostage by the Sumatrans took a line similar to that of Senator Silsbee, and insisted that the American government do something to protect American ships abroad. The fact that the matter was taken up with gusto by the Republicans meant that the Democrats in Congress were put on the defensive, and that some sort of response was soon deemed necessary.

Public opinion grew increasingly hostile until the government was compelled to act: President Andrew Jackson,⁷ who had earned his reputation during the 1812 war with Britain, sent out orders to Commodore John Downes, who was then captain of the American Frigate *Potomac*, that was cruising off the coast of Brazil. The *Potomac* was ordered by President Jackson to go to Kuala Batee, assess the situation and take any course of action deemed necessary to ensure the safety of American merchant vessels sailing in the waters of the East Indies in the future.

The *Potomac* duly shifted course and sailed eastwards, leaving the coastline of Brazil and headed towards South Africa, after which it crossed the Indian Ocean and made its way to the Straits of Malacca. By early February 1832 (one year after the attack on the *Friendship*), it sighted Aceh, and then Kuala Batee, and plans were made for the attack.

The attack on Kuala Batee was done in stages, and employed a combination of guile and strategy. Commodore Downes had his ship disguised as a Dutch merchant vessel, with its guns pulled back behind the decks and all ports shut. (Some accounts, including that by Ellis, suggested that the *Potomac* was disguised as a Danish merchantship.⁸) Upon its approach to Kuala Batee the *Potomac* apprehended a number of locals from the settlement, and questioned them about the nature of defences in the small town. It was decided that the attack (on 6 February 1832) would take place at dawn, using a combination of troops as well as bombardment from sea.

In total, a force of 282 American marines and bluejackets were landed to the north of the settlement, by the shore, accompanied by some light guns. The attack commenced at dawn, with the landing parties attacking the forts of Kuala Batee that were closest to the shore, leading to the loss of an estimated 150 Sumatrans killed in the fighting. The Sumatrans who were overwhelmed by the American guns then retreated to the fifth fort that was deeper inland, while the Americans then

⁶ Re: Wahyu Pratama, *The Battle of Kuala Batu: Aceh diserang Amerika*. In: BliWahyu.com. <http://helixwahyudipra.blogspot.sg/2013/03/battle-of-kuala-batu-aceh-diserang.html>

⁷ Andrew Jackson was the seventh President of the United States of America (1829-1837). Earlier he had distinguished himself during the 1812 war with Britain, the highpoint of his military career being the defence of New Orleans against British forces. Jackson himself belonged to the propertied classes though he campaigned against what he regarded as the emerging 'aristocracy' in the country. He was a slave owner and was regarded as the leader responsible for the relocation of native Americans to American native reserve land, then in Oklahoma. In 1832, the year of the First Sumatran Expedition, Jackson was facing his re-election campaign and was constantly being attacked by his adversaries who accused him of all manner of things, ranging from being power-hungry (thanks to his propensity for hiring appointees from his own political party to the bureaucracy) to allegations of him being a Freemason.

⁸ Ellis, 1898. p. 750.

attacked the town of Kuala Batee itself, setting fire to buildings and boats. As the fighting intensified, a further 300 Sumatrans were said to have been killed or wounded in the combat, and by mid-day the settlement had surrendered to the Americans.⁹ The local chiefs of Kuala Batee had, by then, fled the scene; but the rest of the population were forced to desist in their resistance and the Americans decided to dismantle whatever was left of the defensive structures of the settlement.

American losses were comparatively small, with only two soldiers killed and around half a dozen wounded, though none critical. Commodore Downes and his fellow officers decided that their objective had been met, and after several days moored off Kuala Batee to continue their journey eastwards until they eventually circumnavigated the globe and returned to America.

Though the USS *Potomac*'s journey back to the United States would take several more months, news of the attack on Kuala Batee reached America faster.

On 7 July 1832, the *New-York Observer* ran one of the first reports of the action at Kuala Batee. The *New-York Observer* was an abolitionist, anti-slavery newspaper based in New York and it was a broadsheet with a somewhat religious bent. Its first two pages were often dedicated to religious matters such as Christian missions abroad, the anti-slavery campaign, the abolitionist struggle, etc., while the last two pages were dedicated to worldly matters including politics (American and foreign) and economics. The 7 July issue featured a long report (on page 3) on the military action taken by the Frigate *Potomac* at Kuala Batee that was led by Commodore John Downes and the report reads as follows:

“War With The Malays of Sumatra –

The United States’ frigate Potomac, which was sent to Sumatra, some time since, to punish the Malays of Quallah Battoo, on the coast of that island, for their treachery and murder of several of the crew of the merchant ship the Friendship, arrived at the place of her destination on the 6th of February, disguised as a merchantman. Capt. Downes landed 300 men about a mile above the town, in less than three hours carried three forts, and killed 80 to 100 natives, with the loss of two killed and several wounded. The following particulars are from a letter inserted to the Evening Post of Thursday:

‘United States frigate Potomac, Bantine [Banten] Bay, East Indies.

- *After three weeks stay at Rio de Janeiro, we sailed for the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, at which place we arrived on the 7th of December, 1831. After a stay of one week there, we sailed for the island of Sumatra, East Indies. On the 5th of February (1832) we anchored off Quallah Battoo (the place where the crew of the American ship Friendship,*

⁹ The first reports on the Quallah Battoo incident that reached the United States were vague in the numbers of Sumatran killed or wounded in the fighting. Some of first reports cited the figure of a ‘hundred or so’ Sumatrans killed, while others spoke of ‘many casualties’. The final figure was given in the work by J. Reynolds, whose book on the First Sumatran Expedition was thought to be the most accurate, as he was himself on board the *Potomac* for much of the cruise.

of Salem, were murdered by the Malays). We went in under Dutch colours, disguised as a merchantman, run in the main deck guns and shut the ports, the ports on the spar decks we concealed by throwing back our hammock cloth. Immediately after our arrival we manned our whale boat with several of our officers disguised as sailors; they went ashore under pretence of bargaining for pepper, and in order to reconnoitre and find out which would be the most advantageous method of assailing the forts; but as soon as the natives perceived our boats approaching the shore, upwards of one hundred of them came down to the beach, armed against the crew. As Lieutenant Shubrick, commander, discovered this hostile disposition of the natives, he deemed it prudent not to land.”

The attack on Kuala Batee was described in some detail:

“Now for our attack – in the dead hour of midnight, the shrill pipes of the boatswain and his mates summoned the men to arms – we were all scattered on the decks awaiting the moment. The go-ashore party (of which Jim Willis was one, as Rugler, and George Edwards another) consisting of about three hundred stout-hearted fellows, were shortly in the boats alongside with their instruments of death, and determined on ‘Death or Victory’. At the dawn of day, and ere the morning star had made its appearance, our brave fellows made it on the beach, in four divisions, about one mile above the town and its fortifications – the marines in front. They marched along the beach in military order, each division under the command of its respective officer. Not a sound was heard, save the rolling of the surf.

As they entered the town, Lieut. Hoff, with his division, filed off to the left, to take possession of the fort set apart for him to assail. The marines had scarcely got one hundred yards past him, when they heard the noise of our pioneers breaking open the gates of the first fort with their crowbars and axes, which was immediately followed by a volley of musketry. As soon as they heard this, they knew that the affair was no longer a secret, and hurried to the second fort with all possible speed. The to spare all the women and children. The marines entered the second fort at the charge of the bayonet, and put all to death, except three women, who supplicated for mercy.

There were several women killed who had the hardihood to take up arms when they saw their husbands fall at their feet; indeed it was impossible to distinguish the sex, they dress so much alike.

Lieuts. Ingersoll, Pinkham and Totten attacked the third fort (with their division).

Having possession of the forts, they proceeded to fire them and the town, and to destroy everything of value that was left, and thus in three hours we had the satisfaction of seeing our ‘Stars and Stripes’ proudly waving above our conquered foe.”

The *Observer* report makes it clear that women were indeed killed in the fighting, despite the orders to spare women and children in the combat that ensued. But there is a vivid description of *one* woman in particular, whose conduct is presented in near-heroic terms:

"We lost two men in the conflict; one a marine named Benjamin T. Brown, shot through the heart; and one main-top man, William P. Smith, shot through the head. Both expired instantaneously. Daniel H. Cole, marine, shot through the body, and Henry Dutcher, mizzen-top man, shot through the thigh, both expected to recover.

You may remember – the man named John L. Dubois, ships corporal; he was wounded by a Malay woman in attacking the forts. This woman was with an Indian, probably her husband, who was attacked and killed by Dubois. As soon as she saw her husband fall, she had the courage to revenge him by attacking Dubois with a sabre; she cut him very badly between the upper joint of the thumb and where the wrist meets; the blow would have taken off the hand had it not been retarded by the barrel of the musket which was held at the time of a charge.

The number of enemy dead was estimated at from 80 to 100 killed, and a vast number wounded. The Rajah escaped, but the next in authority with a woman of the first order, were among the killed.

It was fortunate that we attacked them in the morning, and when they so little expected us, otherwise I am of the opinion that few of our men would have returned on-board."

III. From Heroes to 'Savage Murderers': The shift in public opinion following the attack on Kuala Batee

Notwithstanding the apparent success of the *Potomac*'s attack on Kuala Batee, the news of the attack on the Sumatran settlement brought about an interesting and surprising change in public opinion in American society. Following the publication of the news of the attack in the American press, several American newspapers and columnists began to raise questions about the conduct of the captain and crew of the *Potomac*, and to cast doubts about the character of the American combatants instead.

Among the key questions that were raised then were:

- Why did Commodore Downes not negotiate with the chieftains of Kuala Batee first, and find a peaceful way to seek reparation for the damages caused to the merchantship *Friendship*? None of the newspaper reports then mentioned any attempt by Commodore Downes to enter into friendly negotiations with the Sumatrans, or even trying to ascertain what had actually happened to the crew of the *Friendship* that was attacked the year earlier. The *Observer*'s

report gives the impression that the captain had already decided to assault the settlement as soon as the opportunity for doing so presented itself.

- Why was the attack carried out at night (or close to dawn), when it was assumed that the people of Kuala Batee were asleep, and thus unaware and unprepared for the upcoming attack? (The *Observer's* report on 7 July, for instance, states that preparations for the attack began at night, though the landing took place at the break of dawn.) The fact that the newspapers had reported that the *Potomac* had been disguised as a foreign merchant vessel and that preparations for the attack were made at night only added to the speculation among the critics that the assault on Kuala Batee may have employed more cunning and guile rather than courage, and was seen by some as cowardly.
- And crucially: why were women and children killed, and how could the killing of women ever be justified even in the case of a reprisal against piracy? (The *Observer's* report noted that the order was given not to harm any women or children, but later on in the same report it was noted that several women were indeed killed in the fighting; and the report gives a vivid account of the hand-to-hand struggle between at least one American sailor and a Sumatran woman. The report merely notes that in the 'fog of war' situation encountered it was impossible to distinguish between male or female combatants: for 'indeed it was impossible to distinguish the sex, they dress so much alike.'¹⁰)

As the debate over the conduct of the crew of the *Potomac* began to flare up, however, the ship itself was still circumnavigating the globe and finding its way back to American shores. However, the sensational news of the attack on Kuala Batee had already begun to dominate the pages of newspapers from San Francisco to Boston to Washington. Several newspapers and columnists had taken a decidedly hostile stand on the matter, declaring that the attack on Kuala Batee was without merit, cowardly and an instance of excessive force used against ill-prepared belligerents who were unable to defend themselves. Compounding matters was the scale of violence and the number of casualties, with more than a hundred and fifty Sumatrans reported killed or wounded, while American casualties included only two dead.

Rumours began to circulate of American sailors and soldiers engaging in widespread slaughter, rapine and pillage with their commander's consent. Some columnists – having assumed the honorary rank of armchair generals – opined at length that the entire debacle could have been avoided if the captain of the *Potomac* had parleyed with the Sumatrans instead. At least one columnist of a Boston newspaper argued that 'with a launch's crew, and a few marines, he could surround the town, and dictate his own terms, without the shedding of a drop of blood'.¹¹

Thus by mid-1832, the Kuala Batee incident had been digested and re-presented by the American press almost entirely, with newspapers taking opposite sides on the matter. Instead of being valorised

¹⁰ "War with the Malays of Sumatra." *The New-York Observer*, July 7, 1832.

¹¹ Quoted in: *The National Intelligencer*, Washington, July 17, 1833.

and praised as heroes and defenders of the national interest, in some quarters Commodore Downes and his men were vilified instead as 'vain boasters, plunderers and savage murderers of women and children.'¹² The *Potomac's* adventure in the East Indies appeared to be tottering on the verge of a monumental public relations disaster. For more than a year, several newspapers took their respective stands on the issue, as commentary over the incident grew ever more partisan and divisive. As late as 1833 – one year after the Kuala Batee attack and two years after the attack on the *Friendship*, which was the catalyst for the expedition – various broadsheets across America were still harping on the matter and not allowing it to rest.

In July 1833, it was the turn of the *National Intelligencer* to jump into the fray, with yet another lengthy column-cum-editorial that rose in the defence of Commodore Downes and the crew of the *Potomac*. The *National Intelligencer* was, between the 1810s and 1860s, the most popular and widely-read newspaper in Washington. Started by Samuel Harrison Smith, Joseph Gales and William Winston Seaton, the *Intelligencer* was open in its support for the Whigs in Congress. It was one of the few newspapers that reported on daily debates and developments in Congress at the time, and its run continued till the early 1870s, when it was finally superseded by the *Washington Post* and *Washington Star*. On Wednesday 17 July 1833, the *Intelligencer* carried a long report on the Kuala Batee incident, and was openly in support of Commodore Downes. The report read thus:

"Com. Downes and the Frigate Potomac –

We publish, from the New York Commercial Advertiser, a statement by a correspondent of the 'affair of Quallah Battoo', under the direction of Com. Downes, of the Frigate Potomac.

It rejoices us to assist in circulating a defence of this gallant officer, and in recording the spirit and enterprise of his noble crew. We regretted the attacks that have been made on Commodore Downes, for his alleged conduct towards the natives in this affair. We know this officer too well to believe him capable of any act that does not comport with his own, or his country's honor. Our gallant officers glory more in humanity to a foe, than to a triumph. It was this feeling that won their fadeless laurels in the late war. We never believed that Com. Downes had given any order, or sanctioned any act, that would deprive him of that enviable satisfaction which the humane conqueror only can feel. Everybody will be satisfied with the following statement of the case." (emphasis in the original).

That the *Intelligencer* was keen to defend the *humanity* of Commodore Downes was due in part to the scandal that broke when news of the Kuala Batee incident reached America: Downes was accused of ordering the wanton destruction of the entire settlement of Kuala Batee, of choosing not to negotiate with the belligerents, and of ordering the slaughter of women and children who were unarmed.

¹² Ibid.

The report from the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, which was reproduced in full by the *Intelligencer*, reads as follows:

“By a late arrival we have received a number of papers, and I am sorry to see the abuse that has been heaped upon Commodore Downes and his officers, respecting the affair of Quallah Battoo. They have, while being absent from their country and unable to defend themselves, been held up to the censure of their countrymen, and the indignation of the world, as ‘vain boasters, plunderers and savage murderers of women and children.’ I have been informed by an eye witness, an actor in the scene, that the particulars contained in the official return are all strictly true; that there is not a vain boast in the letter; that it was a most perilous enterprise; and would have been attended with the most disastrous results, had there been the slightest want of firmness or prudence.

A great deal has been said about the number that were killed; and an attempt has been made to impress the public mind with the belief that they were murdered in the dead of night, naked and unarmed. Many, it is true, were killed, in open day and with arms in their hands.

The officers engaged in the operation were no doubt as deeply impressed with the sacred character of humanity, and are as much under its benign influence as those who have raised such an outcry against them. They were placed, however, in a critical situation; they had two alternatives to choose between – to kill their opponents or be killed themselves. They chose the first, and so would any one save a madman. They were not quite so quixotic as to be killed rather than to defend themselves.” (emphasis in the original)

The newspaper then goes on to defend the captain and crew of the *Potomac* against the accusation of rapine and plunder, which was one of the more damaging accusations that were levelled against Commodore Downes and his crew:

“If a sordid passion for plunder had placed them in this situation, then humanity might have entertained a doubt as to the propriety of defending themselves at the expense of the attacking party. But their sordid passions did not place them in this perilous position. They were ordered there in the execution of their duty – a painful and dangerous duty, it is true – but not the less imperative on that account. I have understood their government ordered them to land and surround the forts and town, and demand restitution of the property plundered from one of their ships, and the punishment of the murderers. They did so, and mark the result: The first fort that was approached and surrounded for this purpose, opened its fire upon the officer and his men, while he was making his demand, in as intelligent a manner as his imperfect knowledge of their language would permit.”

The *Intelligencer* was particularly keen to defend Commodore Downes and his men of the charge that they had killed any of the women in Kuala Batee, and emphasised the following:

“It is my candid belief, from what I have heard from various sources, that not one woman was killed, knowing her to be as such. One, however, was wounded, but it was done in disarming her after she had fired a ball through the hat of one of the men, wounded him in the head with a javelin, and almost cut his thumb off with a sabre. This is proof of their being of a mild, inoffensive race of people, like the Otaheitans, more sinned against than sinning. It will also confirm in a signal and most conclusive manner the statement of a writer in a Boston paper, wherein he says ‘that with a launch’s crew, and a few marines, he could surround the town, and dictate his own terms, without the shedding of a drop of blood’.” (emphasis in the original)

Though the writer insists that no women were killed in the combat, his claim is disputed by the testimonies made by other participants and witnesses to the event, who noted that women were indeed slain. The *New-York Observer’s* report on 7 July 1832, for instance, noted that: “There were several women killed who had the hardihood to take up arms when they saw their husbands fall at their feet; indeed it was impossible to distinguish the sex, they dress so much alike.”¹³

The author of the report goes to great lengths to salvage the honour and reputation of Commodore Downes and his men – the word ‘humanity’ appears six times in the article, and ‘gallantry’ five. The article ends thus:

*“The above facts, which may be relied on, will, I hope, be sufficient to correct the erroneous statements that have been made, and the false conclusions drawn therefrom in many of the papers of the United States.”*¹⁴

IV. The Final Word? J. Reynolds’ *Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac* (1835)

Andrew Jackson’s Presidency may have been a slow news period indeed, for the Kuala Batee incident remained in the media as the subject of numerous reports, editorial columns and letters well into 1834. By then, the *Potomac* had only begun to make the final stage of its journey back to the United States, where it sighted Boston harbour on 8 April.¹⁵ The captain and crew of the *Potomac* had, by then, come to learn of the controversy surrounding the attack on Kuala Batee though they had not been given the opportunity to respond to any of the charges levelled against them. The final, authoritative reply to all the allegations made against Downes and his fellow officers and crew only came one year later, when two books were written and published about the *Potomac’s* journey across

¹³ *The New-York Observer*, New York, July 7, 1832, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ The *Potomac’s* journey finally ended at Charlestown Naval base the following day, 9th April 1834. Re: J Reynolds (1835), p. 519.

the globe and the attack on the Sumatran settlement: Jeremiah Reynolds' *Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac*¹⁶ (1835) and Francis Warriner's *Cruise of the United States Frigate Potomac*¹⁷ (1835).

The importance of the two books by Reynolds and Warriner cannot be underestimated, for by then, the Kuala Batee incident had been dissected at length in the media back in America. However, all of the commentaries that had been hitherto published were based on secondary sources and reports that had been shared and passed on by other newspapers. Reynolds' and Warriner's account of the voyage of the *Potomac* were told from the perspective of men who had been on board the ship as it circumnavigated the globe, and who had witnessed the events at Kuala Batee first-hand. (Reynolds had been invited on board the *Potomac* when the frigate was in the South Pacific, moored off Valparaiso, Chile. He served as Commodore Downes private secretary for the course of the voyage.)

The two books by Reynolds and Warriner are remarkably alike, which should not come as a surprise as both men were, after all, reporting on events on board the same ship. (Reynolds completed his manuscript in April 1835 and Warriner in May.) Both books make mention of sickness in the East Indies, and both books talk frankly about instances of ill-discipline (leading to the flogging of sailors) during the final stage of the *Potomac*'s voyage across the South Atlantic back to America. Both books are also illustrated, and both feature the same image of the bombardment and attack on Kuala Batee (though the engraving in Reynolds' work is of superior quality.) Warriner's narrative is comparatively dry in its description of events, but it is Reynolds' work that is of greater interest for us, for he states from the outset, that the aim of his book is to offer a final and definitive account of the *Potomac*'s journey in order to respond to the allegations that have been made against the captain and crew of the frigate back in the United States. In the introduction he alludes to the overheated discussions that have taken place in the U.S. as a result of the Kuala Batee attack:

"Partial statements relative to the occurrences at Quallah-Battoo have been published by the journals of the day; and those papers had now reached the Pacific. The attention of Congress had been called to the subject. Mister Dearborn, of the House of Representatives, on the 12th day of July, submitted a resolution calling on the President for the instructions under which Commodore Downes acted, in his attack on the Malays of the island of Sumatra. The resolution was adopted without objections from any quarter; and before the adjournment of the House on the next day, a communication covering the instructions was received from the President, recommending that these papers should not be made public until a full report of the proceedings at Quallah-Battoo should be received from Commodore Downes; intimating, that the vague rumours and partial statements before the public relative to the transactions at that place, when compared to the

¹⁶ Jeremiah N. Reynolds, *Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac, Under the command of Commodore John Downes, during the circumnavigation of the globe, in the years 1831, 1832, 1833, and 1844; Including a particular account of the engagement at Quallah-Battoo, on the coast of Sumatra; with all the official documents relating to the same.* Harpers and bros, New York, 1835.

¹⁷ Francis Warriner, *Cruise of the United States Frigate Potomac Around the World, during the years 1831-1834, Embracing the Attack on Quallah Battoo, including Scenes, Manners, etc.* Leavitt, Lord and Co. New York, 1835.

instructions under which that officer acted, might create an unfavourable prejudice against him in the public mind."¹⁸

Needless to say, by the time that Reynolds had put his pen to paper the 'vague rumours and partial statements' that worried him so had already created an 'unfavourable prejudice in the public mind' against Commodore Downes. The captain and crew of the *Potomac* had already been accused of being the 'brutal murderers of women and children' as we have noted above.

When laying blame for the controversy over the Kuala Batee incident, Reynolds did not shy away from pointing the finger of accusation at the media in particular, which he regarded as the primary source of rumours and disinformation related to the attack in Sumatra:

*"It seemed evident that the public mind, though always just when correctly informed, had, in this instance, been misled by political statements and publications of irresponsible persons, who attempted to pronounce upon the merits of the proceedings at Quallah-Battoo without knowing, or having it in their power to know, a single motive which had influenced the mind of the Commodore during his stay on the Malay coast."*¹⁹ (emphasis mine)

Reynolds' stated aim in his work was to salvage the reputation of Commodore Downes, the crew of the *Potomac* and the reputation of the American navy by extension. To this end, Reynolds marshalled all the resources that he could lay his hands on, and the most important sources of information and evidence that is found in his work were the original orders, recommendations, directives and letters that had passed between Downes and the U.S. navy high command prior, during and after the First Sumatran Expedition. In Reynolds' work, these documents were made public for the first time, and they are featured in the main text as well as the lengthy appendices that come at the end of the book.

It is interesting that Reynolds' work tries to exonerate all the principal characters and agencies of any blame whatsoever, and this includes the American naval high command as well. To this end, Reynolds reproduces the original orders sent to Commodore Downes by Levi Woodbury of the U.S. Navy Department (dated 9 August 1831). The orders given to Downes stated clearly that the *Potomac* should:

"...repair at once to Sumatra, by way of the Cape of Good Hope. ...On your arrival at Quallah Battoo, you will obtain from intelligent ship-masters, supercargoes, and others, engaged in the American trade in that neighbourhood, such information as they might possess in respect of the nature of the government there, the piratical character of the population, and the flagrant circumstances of the injury before mentioned. Should the information substantially correspond to what is given to you in documents marked A and B, the President of the United States, in order that prompt redress may be obtained for

¹⁸ Reynolds, 1835, pp. vi-vii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. vii.

these wrongs, directs that you proceed to demand of the Rajah, or the authorities of Quallah-Battoo, restitution of the property plundered, or indemnity thereof, as well as for injury done to the vessel; and the immediate punishment of those concerned with the murder of the American citizens."²⁰

The order also notes that the captain and crew of the *Potomac* ought to conduct their affairs with caution and sensitivity:

*"Great care must be taken to have such vessel conduct with caution, forbearance, and good faith towards the natives; to render any assistance to American citizens; to make as favourable an impression as possible on the population, of the justice and strength of our government..."*²¹

The orders given to Commodore Downes made it clear that this was not a licence to engage in wholesale slaughter of innocents, and that the *Potomac* was to conduct its affairs with 'caution, forbearance and good faith' instead. By making public the original orders that had been despatched to the ship in 1831 – which was one of the demands made by the politicians in the House of Representatives – Reynolds had at least clarified that the naval department was not responsible for the civilian deaths that occurred at Kuala Batee. His next task was to save the reputation of Commodore Downes himself.

To this end Reynolds includes in his account many of the letters and documents that were sent and shared between Commodore Downes and the American naval command, and in one of them Downes explains and justifies his decision to attack the settlement thus:

"...There was no higher authority or government to which we could make our appeal, and from which we could expect indemnification. Indeed, within a short distance, there were other tribes and chiefs separate and independent of those of Quallah-Battoo.

While making arrangements to open communication with the chiefs, and to make a formal demand for indemnification, I felt it to be my imperative duty to take such steps at the same time as would cut off the retreat of those who had participated in the piracy of the Friendship; and while in the execution of the only feasible plan by which these objects could be effected, our divisions were fired upon, and our strength put at defiance; the action was thus unavoidably commenced; and, as to its result, I need only refer you to my previous communication.

I ascertained, after the attack, that the whole inhabitants of Quallah-Battoo were concerned in the plunder of the Friendship, and the character of the transaction agreed substantially with that furnished by the department...

²⁰ Ibid. p. 528.

²¹ Ibid. p. 529.

*The specie and opium had been divided between the four principle rajahs; and all the other articles taken from the ship were distributed among the people of Quallah-Battoo. All the intercourse I had with the natives while lying at Soo-Soo confirmed me in the correctness of the course adopted; and also that the chastisement inflicted on Qualah-Battoo, though severe, was unavoidable and just; and that it will be the means of giving a permanent security to our commerce for a long time to come.*²²

In this, and the other letters by Downes that were reproduced in Reynolds' work, a picture emerges of a commander who was torn between two objectives: on the one hand to demand retribution for an act of piracy against an unarmed merchant vessel, and on the other hand to proceed cautiously and to create a good impression upon the natives of Sumatra. Downes' own justification for the attack was based on the logic of military necessity, as noted above: He felt that he needed to cut off all possible escape routes for the belligerents, to destroy the offensive capabilities of the enemy and to neutralise the threat of piracy while protecting his own men.

Whether the American public was satisfied with Reynolds' account is an open question, as few contemporary reviews and commentaries of the work can be found today. What is interesting and important to note, however, is that in this relatively un-varnished account of the *Potomac's* role in the Kuala Batee incident, Reynolds does not disguise certain facts: He does not deny that women were killed in the fighting; he does not exaggerate the number of American casualties, or underestimate the number of Sumatran casualties;²³ he does not hide the fact that Kuala Batee was practically razed to the ground after the major forts by the beach had been destroyed. It is clear that as far as the expedition to Sumatra was concerned, the *Potomac* was on a *military* mission to exact revenge for an act of piracy, and certainly not a goodwill mission of any kind – and to this end, after the Sumatrans had surrendered to the Americans, Reynolds noted that their gunpowder supply was blown up, their cannons spiked and thrown into the sea, and their fortifications dismantled as a large part of the settlement (along with the boats of the Sumatrans) were burned and destroyed. Reynolds' work was perhaps the final word on the matter, for as we have seen earlier at the beginning of this paper subsequent accounts of the Kuala Batee incident – such as that which appears in Edward Ellis' 1898 *History of the United States* – have reproduced the account of the incident as presented in Reynolds' work.

Notwithstanding Reynolds' obvious intention to exonerate the leader of the Sumatran expedition from accusations of brutality and violence, the work is also a remarkable study of Sumatran society, that matches the works done by Marsden (1781, 1811)²⁴ and Anderson (1826)²⁵. Reynolds gives a vivid

²² Ibid. pp. 119-120.

²³ The total list of Americans killed and wounded included: William Smith, sailor; Benjamin Brown, marine (killed); and Lt. William Edson, J W Taylor, Daniel Cole, Henry Dutcher, Peter Walsh, Levi McCabe, John Dubois, John Addison, James Huster, James Nolan and James McCabe (wounded). Reynolds also notes that the principal Rajah responsible for the attack on the *Friendship*, Puulow Yemet (Pak Muhammad) was killed, as well as one of the wives of the Rajahs. (Reynolds, 1835. p. 536.)

²⁴ Re: William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra*, Thomas Payne and Sons, London, 1784. (Later republished in 1811).

and comprehensive account of the culture, beliefs and values of the various Sumatran communities he visited and studied – albeit much of his information was culled from testimonies and interviews with Sumatrans he met. His descriptions of Acehnese and Minangkabau society are particularly detailed and well-documented, and he delves into the ancient history of Sumatra as well as its flora and fauna. (He devotes an entire chapter to the merits of the Sumatran coconut.) In short, this was no mere apologia for the conduct of the captain and crew of the *Potomac*, but stands as one of the better studies of Sumatra written by Westerners in the early 19th century as well.

As for the controversy that came in the wake of the First Sumatran Expedition, the modern reader may not be surprised to learn that the matter was only put to rest when it was overtaken by another controversy, namely the Second Sumatran Expedition that took place in 1838.

What *is* of interest to the present-day historian, however, is the fact that even in the early 19th century instances of Western intervention abroad did not go unnoticed, and that the First Sumatran Expedition was certainly not a unique case. Other examples come to mind, such as the strong reaction in London against Britain's invasion of Java in 1811, when the Dutch East Indies was seen as fair game for the British after Holland had capitulated to France in the course of the Napoleonic wars in Europe. Though the British invasion of Java and the rest of the East Indies was seen as a case of securing the borders of British possessions in the Far East, there were also radical critics back in England who regarded it as a case of British imperial ambitions gone too far. *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, which was owned and ran by the Tory-turned-radical William Cobbett, ran one of its longest and most scathing critiques of the British government over the invasion of the Dutch East Indies, accusing Britain of becoming an imperial power 'more threatening than France'.²⁶

The First Sumatran Expedition marked an important turning point in America's relations with maritime Southeast Asia, for it signalled that America had not only come to trade passively, but was also able and willing to use violence in order to protect its commercial interests. In the reports, editorials and books that were published during and after the event, we see how the image of both America and the native Sumatrans had shifted time and again, from 'victims' to 'aggressors' alternatively, and this reminds us of the contested nature of history-writing as well.

²⁵ Re: John Anderson, *Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra, in M.DCCC.XXIII, under the direction of the Government of Prince of Wales Island*. Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood and T. Cadell, 1826.

²⁶ *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, London, 21 December 1811. Printed by Thomas Curson Hansard, Fleet Street, London. pp. 772-773; 774.

V. Concluding observations: Facts remembered and facts forgotten

The First Sumatran Expedition of 1832 was destined not to be the last: Despite the attack on Kuala Batee, and the controversy that erupted as soon as news of the reprisal reached the United States, another attack on another American merchant ship took place six years later, just as the ruckus over the first expedition was about to die down. In 1838, the American merchant vessel *Eclipse* was boarded and attacked by Sumatrans close to Kuala Batee. News of the attack on the *Eclipse* reached the United States, and the vessels *Columbia* and *John Adams*, with a combined force of more than seven hundred soldiers and sailors under the overall command of Commodore George C. Read, were despatched from the coast of Sri Lanka to perform another punitive exercise where once again Kuala Batee and the settlement of Mukie were attacked by troops on land as well as bombarded from sea. Yet again another controversy arose about the use of excessive force, and yet again the matter was only put to rest when an authoritative account of the campaign was penned and published by Fitch W. Taylor (1840).²⁷

It was only after the Second Sumatran Expedition that American merchant vessels sailing across Southeast Asia were safe from further attacks, though in both instances the modern reader may be surprised by the speed by which news of both expeditions travelled across the globe to the U.S., and how divided American public opinion was over the question of American military-naval intervention abroad. This has been the subject of this paper, and we end with a few observations by way of a conclusion:

Firstly, it should be noted that the Kuala Batee incident (and the later attack on the coastal settlement of Muckie (Mukie) during the Second Sumatran Expedition of 1838) took place at a time when the United States was still uneasy with the idea of playing an aggressive, interventionist role in the affairs of other non-Western states. Though opinion was divided over the conduct of the captain and crew of the *Potomac*, many in the United States then believed that the attack on Kuala Batee was partly justified as an act of reprisal for the earlier attack on the merchantman *Friendship*; though this did not lead to calls for more direct and lasting intervention in Sumatran affairs, and was not accompanied by calls for the colonisation of Sumatra. It would take another seven decades for American public opinion to shift to a more expansionist register, when the United States would play a decisive role in its war against Spain and its eventual colonisation of the Philippines in (1898-1946).

The overall policy of the United States then as far as other far-flung territories was generally non-interventionist. It is also important to remember that the popular perception of America by Americans then was that it was a non-aggressive nation that did not have any grand expansionist agenda, unlike the 'old European' states of Britain, France, Holland and Spain that were seen as imperialist powers. It was only after the American Civil War, and in the post-reconstruction period, that the United States

²⁷ Taylor, Fitch W. *The Flag Ship, or, A Voyage Around the World in the United States Frigate Columbia; attended by her Sloop of War John Adams, and bearing the broad pennant of Commodore George C Read*. D Appleton and Co, Broadway, New York: 1840. Fitch Taylor was the chaplain to the squadron that was under the command of Commodore Read, and his work covers the full extent of Read's voyage across the world which included the punitive raid against the Malays of Sumatra.

would seek a more prominent place and role in international affairs, leading to its war against Mexico and Spain, and the eventual colonisation of the Philippines. The articles and books of 1831-1834 therefore give us an interesting glimpse into the popular mindset of Americans at a time when American imperial power was still dormant.

Secondly, it ought to be noted that though some opinion-makers in the American media were supportive of the *Potomac's* actions at Kuala Batee, many ordinary Americans were still shocked and offended by the idea that women and children may have been killed in the fighting, and that the civilian casualties in the attack were too high. Compounding matters for the captain and crew of the *Potomac* was the fact that North Sumatran society was far more egalitarian than America's at the time, and that among the communities of North Sumatra there had long been the tradition of women fighting alongside men as warriors of equal standing and rank. Americans at the time had little understanding or knowledge of Sumatran society, and would have been surprised to learn that the kingdom of Aceh had been ruled by four queens in succession, and once had a woman as the admiral of its royal navy: Admiral (Laksamana) Malahayati. (Today an Indonesian battleship is named after her, and it was she who led the Acehnese navy in its attack on Malacca). That women may have taken part in the fighting, and were killed in the process, was nonetheless something shocking to many American readers who regarded the act of killing women as un-manly and un-gallant, and this did some damage to the reputation of the crew of the *Potomac* later.²⁸

Thirdly, it is interesting to note that the debate over the conduct of the captain and crew of the *Potomac* continued to linger several years after the incident itself, and was only put to rest when the final account of the incident was made public thanks to Reynolds' publication of the *Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac* in 1835. Though several newspapers openly came out in support of Commodore Downes and his crew, there remained others who continued to chip away at the credentials of the expedition's captain and who continued to question the conduct of the entire campaign and its consequences. Coming as it did at a time when there were no post-combat tribunals or investigations, the role of embedded scholar-seamen like Reynolds was important for it was his account that was seen as the most comprehensive and authoritative. But it also demonstrates the power of public opinion, and how incidents such as the attack on Kuala Batee, thousands of miles away from the lobbies of Washington, could make or break the careers of politicians and officers alike.²⁹

²⁸ It is also interesting to note that while American public opinion was hostile to the idea that Sumatran women and children were killed at Kuala Batee, the same sympathy and compassion for women and children was not evidently displayed in the case of the killing of native American women and children during the Indian wars in America at the same time. The newspapers of the period (1831-1834) were full of reports of American expansionism into native American lands, and the many military campaigns that drove the native Americans further West or into native preserves. President Jackson's popularity, as we have seen, was due to the fact that he had ordered the acquisition of these new territories, and by doing so expanded the frontier of the United States even further, opening up vast new territories for settlement and economic development. With hindsight, it seems as if American sympathy for other native communities was focused further away from the shores of America then.

²⁹ That newspapers in America were wont to play up differences of opinion and perspective in the Kuala Batee affair was also not new nor unique. Up to the 1830s, American newspapers were still chewing the cud over conflicting testimonies related to earlier battles, and in 1833 while the Kuala Batee attack was in the headlines there were also other disputes that dated back to the War of 1812-1815 between the Americans and the British. *Niles' Weekly Register* (23 November 1833) featured a debate over the use of the password 'Booty and Beauty'

Though the attack on Kuala Batee and the controversy that surrounded the First Sumatran Expedition were to remain as talking points for several years to come, none of the principal actors and agents in the affair suffered any serious damage to their respective careers: Senator Silsbee, Robert Stone, Andrew Dunlop and the managers of Silsbee, Pickman and Stone felt themselves vindicated as a result of the punitive expedition that seemed (for a few years at least) to secure the waters off Sumatra safe for American commercial shipping. President Andrew Jackson would win his Presidential race in 1832 and continue with his campaign to relocate the Native Americans to special reservation lands, thus adding a hundred million acres of land to the United States, and survive two attacks on himself (in 1833 and 1835).

Commodore John Downes was not as fortunate as President Jackson, and after his return to the United States he would find himself caught in the maelstrom of accusations that would linger for years to come. His strongest supporter then was President Jackson himself, who had, after all, despatched the *Potomac* on its fateful mission and advised Downes to use any means necessary to protect American commercial shipping in the East Indies. Though the controversy would simmer down in due course, it was only the publication of Reynold's account – in 1835 – that put the matter to rest. Downes would retire as the Commander of the Charlestown Naval Yard, and have three American ships named after him; but he was never given another command at sea after the expedition to Kuala Batee.

Kuala Batee itself would grow famous (or infamous) as a den of pirates and marauders as a result of the 1832 incident, and it was the attack on the *Friendship* that prompted the Dutch navy to take further action and to intervene in the affairs of North Sumatra. This culminated in the Dutch expedition against Aceh in 1832 (led by Lieutenant Colonel Roeps) and the conquest of Baros by the Dutch, which set in motion Dutch expansionist manoeuvres in the region and the eventual Aceh War later.

Though the true facts behind the Kuala Batee incident would only appear gradually in dribs and drabs over the years, it remains that it was a singular incident that captured the imagination of an entire generation of columnists, editors, scholars and opinion-makers. The aim of this paper was to show that foreign interventions that took place thousands of miles away from the shores of America had managed to become worthy topics even then, and were hotly debated at a time when news print was the only source of information about the outside world. Present-day historians who have worked on America's important role in Southeast Asian affairs in the 20th century may wish to look further back to the Kuala Batee incident in order to back-date America's presence and involvement in the region even further. Though Indonesia's history books have hardly mentioned the Kuala Batee incident – overshadowed as it has been by the Aceh war, the anti-colonial struggle and later the separatist

by the British, insisting that it alluded to British plans to sack and plunder the town of New Orleans by the troops of General Packenham. [See: "Booty and Beauty." *Niles' Weekly Register*, November 23, 1833. The dispute was between American and British historians, the former of whom insisted that the words *Booty and Beauty* suggested that the plan of the British was to sack and plunder the city of New Orleans had the forces of General Packenham succeeded. British historians, however, insisted that the choice of words was accidental and that there was never any plan to destroy New Orleans.]

struggle in Aceh – it would be important to include this event in the broader chronicle of Indonesia's complex relations with the Western world.

Today, the visitor to Kuala Batee will note that there are no monuments, statues or anything that reminds the locals of what had happened there almost two centuries ago. But a closer reading of news reports, opinion pieces and books that were written in the 1830s-1840s would reveal that Kuala Batee was once a locality that played a much larger role in geo-politics and geo-economics. Not all the facts have come to light, but we can at least speak with some certainty about those who took part in the action in Kuala Batee in 1832, and we can even name the bluejacket who is about to stab at the fallen Sumatran in Carter Beard's painting: John L. Dubois. But the identity of the mysterious Sumatran woman who grips at Dubois' bayonet with both hands remains unknown – though her courage has been immortalised for posterity, and continues to divide the jury.

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