Human death and especially murder makes us ask, "why"? Political murder we assume has a logic or a reason to it. The logic of this murder gives us no satisfaction, not only because the motives are wholly reprehensible but because this is a logic out of control, a reason that is then paradoxically senseless. The political facts are clear. There has been killing on a large scale in Aceh since the 1980s, increasing in the last years of the New Order and probably continuing to increase since then. At first the victims of the army were villagers. And these, naturally enough, formed the bulk of the supporters of the Free Aceh Movement, whose acronym from the Indonesian (and not the Acehnese) is GAM. Recently a new type has been targeted. Students on a large scale joined the movement for a free Aceh late, after President Suharto took office. When I visited Aceh last, in February of 1999, many were afraid of being disappeared in the way students had been in Java in the days of Suharto, but it had not yet occurred. Now we have this obscenity.

In several places in Indonesia, the army has followed a policy that was well developed during the Suharto regime. To prove that Indonesia needs a strong army, it provoked violence, acting through hired thugs or simply doing the job itself. The result, more or less generally accepted in Indonesia in the past, was the conviction that a strong army and a strong government were needed to control violence. The imperfection of the logic did not diminish the feeling, prevalent in the middle class and permeating most of Indonesian society, that a dominating government was needed in the face of threats from within Indonesian society itself. There was little evidence for this need. One effect of this fear was that cruelties which occurred in Aceh and in other places were discounted in the capital and elsewhere. That, I believe, is one condition for the continuation of the violence today.

Why does it continue today? For one thing, because the army has interests in Aceh as does the Indonesian state. Presumably, the army is needed to protect the natural gas complex in Lhok Seumawe which furnishes a portion of the national budget. Indeed, it was in Lhok Seumawe that the GAM got its toehold in Aceh. Peasants displaced when the plant was constructed furnished its first large group of followers. But the security of the plant is in fact jeopardized today by the conditions the army has created which produce recruits for the GAM. The interests of soldiers themselves are considerable. It is widely known that, before the end of the New Order, a peasant could not sell even a cow without giving 10 percent to the army. And the development projects that commenced when Aceh finally voted for the government party were a source of corruption on a grand scale. The possibilities for corruption have diminished since the change of regime. What is left is control of the ganja trade. It was, indeed, a fight over control of this trade between police and others—possibly from one faction of the GAM—that led to the sending of special forces under the notoriously brutal Suharto son-in-law, Lt. General Prabowo. This set off the large-scale brutalities in Aceh as the army bored its way into everyday transactions. Prabowo is gone, but the atrocities continue. Material interest, though diminished, remains, but I do not think it
is sufficient to account for the continuing violence.

That might be ascribed to the strategy of the army and possibly to political interests connected with Suharto. Killing, torture, and rape are the desperate acts of those who will not accept that they have been displaced. But there is more. Mussolini was hung by the heels. Suharto remains perfectly safe in Jakarta, protected ultimately not by soldiers or by concern for law but, once again, by fear of political disorder and violence. This fear is in the interests of anyone else who is willing to resort to large-scale violence. Suharto is not necessarily the mastermind behind the present violence, but the political assumptions he developed can be used by others. The belief that the criminal has a power and that that power will be recognized, accepted, and guarantee political position was generated by Suharto, possibly during the massacre of hundreds of thousands of suspected communists in 1965 and '66, when he came to power. Suharto put it into practice on other occasions since then. If criminals are to be feared, criminals are powerful. Those who act like them are therefore powerful too. When they are the head of state, criminality is granted legitimacy. A state governed by criminals is one thing. A state that founds itself on criminality only seems like an impossibility. The terrible condition of Indonesia is that violence is not merely directed toward determined ends. It is thought to have a general significance and to compel recognition and assent. For some in Indonesia today, it is the way to gaining and regaining respect and position.

What does this mean in Aceh? There, the result is that Acehnese are pitted against the army and, since the army is the most powerful Indonesian institution, against Indonesia. This has led to a situation that only looks like the ex-Yugoslavia. The difference is important, I think, in understanding the desperate situation of Jafar Siddiq and others like him. In the ex-Yugoslavia, the end of communism led to the resurgence of ethnic identities from the time of the Austro-Hungarian empire that Tito had not been able to eradicate. One cannot say the same about Aceh. Geoffrey Robinson says that Acehnese resistance to Indonesia owes nothing to the reputed character of Acehnese as resistance fighters. Acehnese gained their reputation by fighting the Dutch "pacifiers" of the Acehnese kingdom between 1873 and 1914. Forty years of very bloody struggle. Yet, Robinson says, it does not contribute to Acehnese resistance.1 And he is correct, in my opinion. The great heroes of the Acehnese wars remembered in Aceh and in the rest of Indonesia are only a few. They have streets in Jakarta named after them and are precisely national heroes, heroes of the anti-colonial struggle and not in particular Acehnese heroes. I failed to note this fact in my years in Aceh. There are a few figures celebrated in Aceh from the seventeenth century. But there is not a single monument in Aceh to any of the very numerous men who died in the holy war against the Dutch. The point is that the war against the Dutch became a popular war when it became a holy war; it was not an Acehnese war except in that the people were Acehnese. Some of its important leaders, for instance, were Indian or Arab. The anti-colonial war, it seems, did little to form a sense of ethnic identity. That war was a Muslim war, which should make us ask why the present struggle is not framed in religious terms. When peace was imposed and Acehnese history resumed, it was as part of the Indonesian nationalist movement in which so much of the

archipelago was involved. Aceh wanted a large place for Islam in independent Indonesia. But when it revolted against Sukarno’s Indonesia, it called itself Darul Islam Indonesia, and not Darul Islam Aceh. It thus separated itself from the chance it had to think of itself as an ethnic group or a people defined by their particular language or descent.

Hasan Mohammed Tiro, founder and head of the GAM, bases his movement on his own descent from the last important leader of that war. He places himself in the line of the Acehnese sultans. Some of his followers use titles reserved for sultans when they refer to him. This fits oddly in present-day Aceh, which has been part of Indonesian history from the beginning of that nation. Aceh’s leaders, its thinking, its traditions have been incorporated into Indonesia. When, then, the atrocities began and resistance arose, it took two forms. The peasants who had themselves been tortured by the military, who had their family members killed and raped, called for revenge. They joined the GAM and there they waited for their revenge until Hasan Mohammed Tiro, in distant Sweden, gave the word for war to start. Hasan Mohammed Tiro wanted Acehnese to be instructed in their own traditions and history first and to understand that Aceh had never legitimately been a part of the Indonesian republic. Then they could fight. Most are still waiting.

The students who wanted an independent Aceh in 1999 when I last visited Aceh had no or little idea of the GAM’s program. Nor did they care. There was no other leader in sight, the religious leaders having been co-opted by the government party during the New Order. “Hasan Mohammed Tiro” and “Gerakan Aceh Merdeka” (GAM) were words which to them meant “release.” Release, of course, from the relentless violence of the army. At that time, no student had yet been killed. Student hatred of the army came from their deep sympathy—indeed, deep identification—with the injured peasants of the countryside. This was no more than identifying themselves with their own origins. But, in doing so, they were left without a means of conceptualizing their situation. What does it mean to be “Acehnese” today? It means to be free of the armed brutes who massacre at will. But the designation “Aceh” is without the sense of historical continuity and without the resurrection of ancient hatreds that went with the resurgence of ethnic politics in the ex-Yugoslavia. There are, for that matter, a few non-Acehnese who are supporters of the GAM in Aceh.

The break in history from the Acehnese War to Indonesian nationalism might have been repaired by recourse to the study of history. But yet another mark of the devastation of the New Order, of the thorough deculturization that hollowed out the country, is that nothing students studied helped them. None of the many I spoke with drew, in any way, on what they had learned. On the one hand, a large university and an important institute of Islamic studies founded in the 1950s expanded and established itself in the New Order, educating large numbers of young people. But on the other hand, that education had nothing to do with the realities of life in the province or in the nation. The difficulties of establishing an identity apart from Indonesia have not yet been overcome or even begun to be broached.

One result of this, in my opinion, is bewilderment in interpreting specific events. For instance, when someone is killed one can soon after hear two stories. He was killed by the army as a member of GAM or he was killed by GAM members or fellow villagers because, for instance, he was an informer for the army. Often the same person
told me both stories without any awareness that they were contradictory. Such people tell the same story from two points of view. They are successively Indonesians, reciting the event as it would have been told in the time of Suharto, and they are Acehnese.

But they remain, despite this, clear that responsible for their suffering is a tyrant. That tyrant they call Indonesia. In these circumstances, one has enormous sympathy for a people who have been violated out of criminal greed and brutality. They are not armed, intellectually and culturally speaking, against the onslaught. Their movement, rather, comes out of a deep humanity. It is from human, and not national or ethnic motives, that they feel the torture suffered by their fellows. We owe them respect and we pay it today in honoring Jafar Siddiq Hamzah.

— James T. Siegel