Harvard Law School professor Alan Dershowitz defended so many high-profile clients, including O. J. Simpson, Claus von Bülow, Mike Tyson, and Bill Clinton, that every time his son saw a case in the newspaper, he “knew” his dad was about to get a call.

Elon’s supposition is “not far from the truth,” Dershowitz declares, with characteristic immodesty. And, though he claims to have “mixed feelings” about his own celebrity, Dershowitz clearly relishes his appearances on television and radio, his best-selling books, hobnobbing with the rich and famous, and his reputation as perhaps the winningest — and most combative — appellate criminal defense lawyer in the country.

In “Taking the Stand,” Dershowitz commands the stage. He provides a deeply personal and passionate account of his formative years as an Orthodox Jew, educated at Yeshiva University High School and Brooklyn College. He then walks the reader through the evolution of his legal career and thinking, all the while weaving in details of his personal and family life. He distinguishes between his public persona (as the aggressive, smart-alecky “Dersh character”) and “the real Alan.”

And he fills his book to overflowing with fascinating and funny vignettes involving his cases and clients, and probing and provocative insights into contemporary legal controversies, ranging from censorship to civil rights, national security, sexual harassment, rape, abortion, the separation of church and state, and the use of scientific evidence in murder cases.

Whether he is discussing people or policies, Dershowitz leaves no doubt about where he stands. Warren Burger’s deep, stentorian voice made him “sound like a chief justice,” he writes, “as long as one didn’t consider the content of what he was saying.” Mike Tyson, whom he defended against a charge of rape, “was a wonderful client, always polite, always honest, always honorable and always thinking of others.” Dershowitz is also capable of biting the hand that fed him. During breakfast with him, he tells us, Leona Helmsley, his former client and nicknamed “The Queen of Mean,” smashed a cup and a saucer onto which a bit of tea had dripped and screamed at the waiter to “clean it up and beg me for your job.”

Dershowitz also offers novel interpretations of cases involving claims of alien abduction and the possibility that a person who shoots a corpse could be convicted of attempted murder. And he courts controversy with opinions about hot-button legal issues. Dershowitz warns that selective prosecution of leaks will augment the power of government. He points out that rape is among the most underreported of crimes and also among the most falsely reported crimes.

He argues that abortion should have been left to the “rough and tumble” of legislative politics rather than “the ipse dixit of five justices.” And he insists that in the Paula Jones case, President Clinton could and should have avoided testifying to a grand jury (and walking into a perjury trap) by defaulting, with a claim that the dignity of his office precluded him from answering questions about sexual relationships, and agreeing, without admitting liability, to pay damages.

Now in his eighth decade, Dershowitz continues to be afflicted with FOMS, a “fear of missing something.” And, although he has been lambasted by the left, especially for his staunch support of Israel, Dershowitz remains an unvarnished, unrepentant liberal, with a long and distinguished record on behalf of freedom of expression, civil rights, and gender equality.

Nonetheless, as “Taking the Stand” also demonstrates, it’s easy to understand why Justice Antonin Scalia would deny Dershowitz’s claim that in Bush v. Gore he had violated the oath of office requiring him to “administer justice without respect to persons,” but later conclude that Dershowitz was “not as nasty a guy as my right-wing friends believe.”

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