



Under Color of Law

A. Dwight Pettit

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This memoir from a natural storyteller is an intelligent and heartfelt record of the continuing struggle to find justice for all.

More than a memoir, A. Dwight Pettit's *Under Color of Law* is an eye-opening slice of American history framed by important civil rights cases—local and national, criminal and civil, obscure and infamous—that span generations, as every successful step forward is preceded by courageous failures. Pettit's reflections, revealed through a uniquely sculpted point of view, offer an intelligent and heartfelt record of the continuing struggle to find justice for all.

Born into a larger-than-life family of African and Cherokee descent in the dawning era of desegregation, Pettit recalls the personal and political significance of three particular cases, his “legal trilogy.” He also highlights the role played by his formative years, his education, and his athletic, military, and work experience in shaping his views of the American legal system, focusing on the evolving issue of race from classrooms to communities, courtrooms, and beyond.

As he is a natural storyteller, Pettit's narration flows through recollections of his childhood and adolescence, frequently showcasing parallels in the legal, political, and economic climate of the times. Precedents and complicated concepts are neatly interspersed, creating situations that law students, lawyers, and laymen alike can understand and appreciate. The author includes personal photographs of the Pettit family posing with the likes of Muhammad Ali and Jimmy Carter, setting a tone that is both professional and intimate. High-profile cases and name-dropping (e.g., Mike Tyson and Ray Lewis) occur alongside tales of men and women of all classes of society, often giving voice to the previously nameless and faceless individuals involved in lawsuits.

Opening in the 1940s but with central cases in the '60s and '70s and touching on the current state of affairs, numerous timely issues are mentioned. Using a continuous flow of anecdotes, hot topics such as police brutality, the role of law enforcement, religious discrimination, caste systems within African-American communities, and even education and testing are handled with straightforward language and tact. Clinical and passionate in turns, Pettit draws from his decades of experience as he shares a wealth of knowledge, with pride in his family and ancestry apparent throughout.

From boxing with his uncles and on the street to hazing at Howard University and leading political campaigns, Pettit's memories often reach legendary status. He draws a parallel, for example, to a Denzel Washington football film: “I did not have any black teammates; it was just me. I always get teary-eyed when I watch that movie [*Remember the Titans*] because it brings back such real memories.”

Relevant for people who are black, white, Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, *Under Color of Law* gently but firmly exposes difficult truths—from the highs and lows of the Civil Rights Movement to the continued fight for equality and justice for racial and ethnic minorities within the American legal system. This is a must-read book for anyone working in law or law enforcement, or who has an interest in different perspectives in contemporary or historical nonfiction.

PALLAS GATES MCCORQUODALE (January 8, 2016)

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