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**Dershowitz on the Defense****BYLINE:** By BARRY MEIER**SECTION:** Section BU; Column 0; Money and Business/Financial Desk; Pg. 1**LENGTH:** 2607 words

Last month, demonstrators at Johns Hopkins University interrupted Alan M. Dershowitz as he was giving a fiery speech defending Israel. The disruption normally would not have fazed Mr. Dershowitz, a former Harvard Law School professor who thrives on controversy and relishes taking on opponents in and out of the courtroom.

The protesters, however, were not challenging his Middle East politics. Instead, they held up a sign reading, "You Are Rape Culture."

Mr. Dershowitz knew what it meant. A decade ago, he had defended a friend, a money manager named Jeffrey E. Epstein, after authorities in Palm Beach, Fla., found evidence indicating that he was paying underage girls to give him sexual massages. The lawyer led a scorched-earth attack on the girls and, with a team of high-priced lawyers, cut a plea deal for Mr. Epstein that the local police said was too lenient.

Over a five-decade career, Mr. Dershowitz has represented some of America's most prominent criminal defendants, including O. J. Simpson, Leona Helmsley, Mike Tyson and Claus von Bulow. Now, he finds himself on the other side, in a legal battle to clear his own name. At 77, he is struggling to absorb a bitter lesson — that choosing the wrong client can exact its own cost.

Last December, as part of a filing in an ongoing lawsuit, a woman charged that Mr. Dershowitz had sex with her when she was underage. Mr. Dershowitz called the claim an "outrageous lie" and over the last year has faced fallout from the accusation.

"This is very serious," Mr. Dershowitz said last month at his apartment in Manhattan. "It involves my life, my legacy, my career, my history, my reputation."

As he has defended that legacy, there has been a lawsuit, a counterclaim and even an accusation of an extortion plot against the billionaire Leslie H. Wexner, the chairman of L Brands, the retail empire that includes Victoria's Secret and Henri Bendel. It also has pitted Mr. Dershowitz against another of the nation's most famous lawyers, David Boies, who represents his accuser.

The two lawyers are in an increasingly virulent war. In October, Mr. Dershowitz testified in a deposition that Mr. Boies had privately assured Mr. Dershowitz that he did not believe the claims of his client, ██████████. "He said that he would not have taken this case if they had known she was going to accuse me," Mr. Dershowitz said recently.

Mr. Boies responded that he never made such a statement. "The only explanation I have is that he is so emotional about this that he starts saying things without being careful," Mr. Boies said in an interview. "He has been someone whose approach in litigation is to attack the other side."

In recent weeks, efforts to resolve the thicket of legal actions have begun, but Mr. Dershowitz insists that any settlement must clear him of sexual wrongdoing. The woman accusing Mr. Dershowitz has not filed a complaint with the authorities or a lawsuit against him. Instead, her allegation first emerged in a lawsuit that challenged Mr. Epstein's plea agreement.

Mr. Dershowitz long taught his students that everyone, even those charged with the most heinous crimes, deserves a defense. But he now says he hesitated when Mr. Epstein called him in 2006 to ask for help because he was being investigated in connection with sex crimes.

"I said, 'Look, you know Jeffrey, we're acquaintances, maybe that's not such a great idea,'" Mr. Dershowitz said. "He said, 'No, no, no, I really need you to do this.'"

The case, Mr. Dershowitz realized, "was right in my wheelhouse."

In December 2005, a few months before he got that phone call, Mr. Dershowitz, his wife, children and grandchildren were vacationing at Mr. Epstein's Palm Beach mansion.

The friendship between the men started in the mid-1990s on Martha's Vineyard. Not long after they met, Mr. Epstein invited Mr. Dershowitz to a birthday party for Mr. Wexner. Instead of accepting presents, the retail magnate had a tradition of asking friends to bring the most interesting person they had met over the last year.