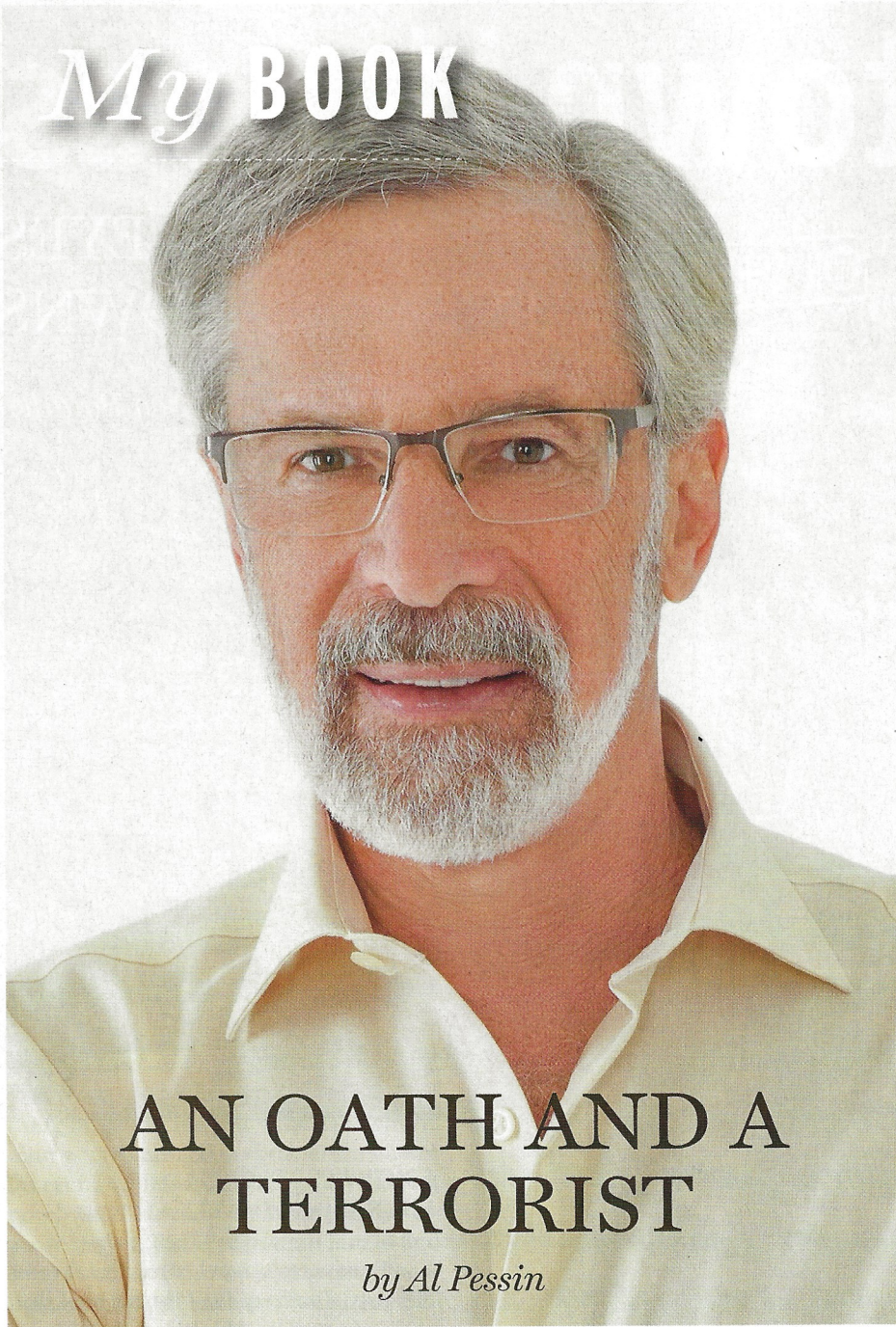


My BOOK



AN OATH AND A TERRORIST

by Al Pessin

It was the late 2000s and the United States government was engaged in a global hunt for Osama bin Laden. It was potentially the most interesting story in the world. But the effort was top secret, so for a reporter covering the Pentagon, there wasn't much I could write about it.

Then something happened that gave me an idea—not an idea for a news story, an idea for a novel.

Walking through the Pentagon's central courtyard one day, I came upon a ceremony. White wooden folding chairs were lined up neatly in front of a stage. On the chairs were

mostly civilians, ethnic clusters in traditional clothes from Asia, Africa, Pacific Islands, and elsewhere. In the middle of each cluster was a military member in a dress uniform—Air Force blue, Army green, Marine Corps khaki, Navy and Coast Guard summer white.

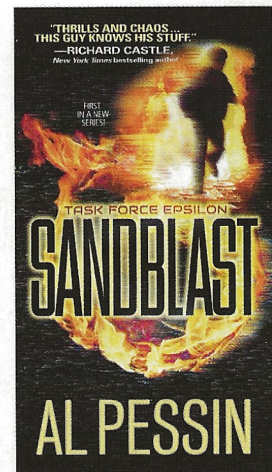
A senior official stepped to the lectern and asked the troops in the audience to stand and raise their right hands. I saw that each was holding a holy book—Bibles, Korans, and others. The midday sun glinted off their buttons and medals. Their families looked up at them with admiring, loving smiles.

The official said, "Repeat after me. I hereby

declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty...."

This was a citizenship ceremony for people who were already serving in the US military.

Until that moment, I had not been aware that it is possible to serve in our armed forces without being a citizen, as long as you are a legal resident. These people reciting the citizenship oath had already taken another oath to serve in the military—something most Americans born into citizenship do not do.



It was a very moving event. And it also got me thinking. What unique capabilities do these people bring to the war against terrorism?

That thought process led to the creation of the main character in my novel *Sandblast*, US Army Lieutenant Faraz Abdallah. He's an American of Afghan heritage, who is able to go into Afghanistan undercover to hunt for the world's most notorious terrorist.

America has used diversity against its enemies before. The Navajo code talkers are a well-known example. My idea was to bring the concept into our 21 century wars.

Faraz's ethnicity and mission became the central conceit around which I could build a story drawing on my experiences traveling to war zones, living in South Asia and the Middle East, and being part of the Pentagon and White House press corps. I was able to illuminate who our troops are, the depth of their commitment, and the life-and-death obstacles they face trying to live up to their oaths.

In the book, Faraz's loyalty, bravery, and skill are tested by both sides. It all comes down to the strength of his character and his connection to the deepest aspects of his identity. †

Sandblast: A Task Force Epsilon Thriller, Al Pessin, Pinnacle, March 2020 \$8.99