

OPINION

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ENDORSEMENTS

Two incumbents deserve to stay on high court

Campaign donations came in from all over the country, and at first Christine Vinh Weems didn't know why. The Democrat running for a spot on the Texas Supreme Court filed her papers to run as soon as the application process opened in December.

"It took me a second to realize what was happening," Weems told us. "What was happening in December was Kate Cox."

You may recall that Cox became national news after she asked Texas courts to clarify whether the medical exception in the state's abortion ban would apply to her. She'd recently learned that her expected baby had a fatal genetic condition. Carrying the pregnancy to term could have endangered her health and her ability to have kids in the future.

The all-Republican Texas Supreme Court blocked a lower court's order that would have allowed Cox to have an abortion. She obtained one in another state. Other Texas women have had to wait until their bodies go into sepsis before doctors, afraid of severe criminal and civil penalties, have been willing to perform abortions to save their lives. In *Zurawski v. Texas*, a unanimous decision by the court did not provide many of the clarifications women sought.

We've repeatedly expressed exasperation over the failure of the Legislature, courts and Texas Medical Board to protect the lives of pregnant women — and we considered the Texas Supreme Court's rulings on abortion in making the following endorsements. Yet, most cases before this court don't have to do with hot-button issues. It hears appeals in civil cases such as medical malpractice settlements and disputes over property. We put a premium on integrity, competence and relevant experience, and we often endorse candidates with whom we disagree on specific issues.

Place 2: Jimmy Blacklock, Republican

At first glance, the resume of the incumbent Republican would suggest he's a partisan lawyer masquerading as an impartial judge. Jimmy Blacklock, 44, worked for Gov. Greg Abbott up until the governor appointed him in 2017 to replace an outgoing justice on the Texas Supreme Court. Abbott boasted at the time, "I don't have to guess or wonder how Justice Blacklock is going to decide cases because of his proven record of fighting for pro-life causes." In 2018, we endorsed his Democratic opponent.

Since then, Blacklock has shown judicial independence. He wrote an opinion finding that the governor does not have the authority to declare that transgender treatments for children constitute child abuse; only the Legislature does. He also wrote an opinion early in the pandemic suggesting that many of Abbott's COVID restrictions were likely unconstitutional. More recently, he authored the smackdown of Attorney General Ken Paxton's attempt to block a gun ban at the Texas State Fair.

Blacklock's Democratic challenger, DaSean Jones, 46, is an Army combat veteran who served in Iraq, earned a law degree and has worked in civil and criminal law. He's currently a Harris County felony criminal court judge. Jones garnered negative press in 2020 for lowering bail amounts for felony defendants and granting personal recognizance bonds. When he ran for reelection in 2022, we endorsed his opponent. We commend Jones for dedicating his life to service, as a soldier and a judge. He would bring diversity to the court as a Democrat and a Black man. But we suggest that voters stick with Blacklock because of his relative independence and greater experience in civil appellate law.

Place 4: Christine Vinh Weems, Democrat

The Republican incumbent in this race, John Devine, really is an activist

and ideologue masquerading as a judge. In the primary, he narrowly beat out a principled conservative with experience as an appellate judge. We hope enough Republican voters are willing to put integrity above party in the general election.

Devine, 65, did not meet with us. He also routinely misses oral arguments so he can tour Texas to make the sorts of partisan speeches that judicial codes of ethics discourage. Judges ought to approach cases with an open mind, not with their fist jammed on the scales of justice. Another no-no is conflicts of interest, or even the appearance of one. That's essential to maintaining the trust of the public, but Devine didn't recuse himself from a sex abuse case the Texas Supreme Court heard against former Southern Baptist Convention leader Paul Pressler, even though Devine worked at Pressler's law firm at the time the alleged abuse occurred. He's bragged about being arrested at anti-abortion protests and gained notoriety for putting up a painting of the Ten Commandments in his courtroom. For

voters who may agree with his belief that the concept of church-state separation is a "myth," we ask you to consider whether his conduct matches your deeply held values.

The Democratic candidate, Christine Vinh Weems, 48, is a district court judge in Harris County who hears civil cases. In the Houston Bar Association judicial evaluation, she received high marks, and she manages her docket efficiently. Her family fled Vietnam, and she would be the first Asian American elected at a statewide level in Texas. We wish that Weems had more experience in appellate law, but her temperament and experience as a judge will serve her well.

Devine not only violates basic codes of judicial conduct, he's not showing up for work. We urge Democrats and Republicans to vote for Weems.

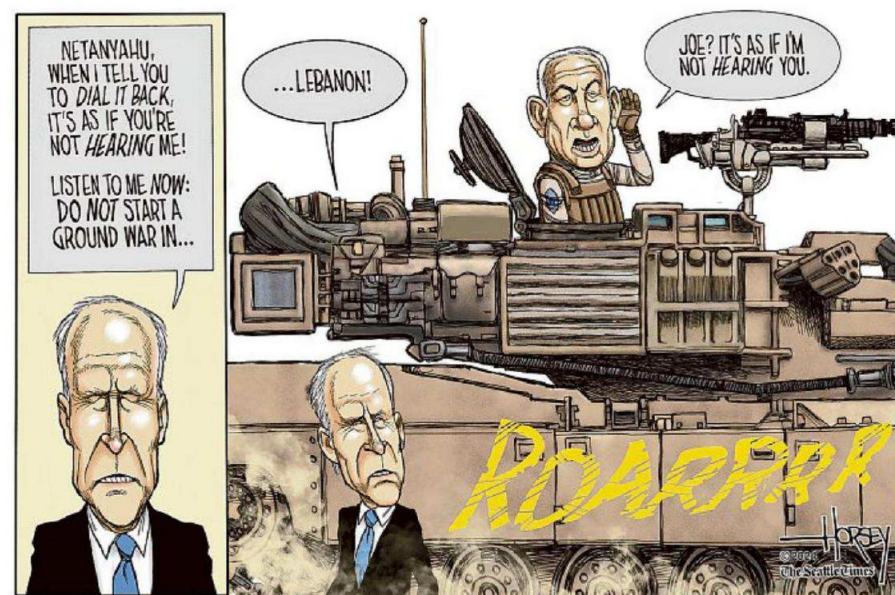
Place 6: Jane Bland, Republican
Voters have their pick of two strong candidates in this one. Justice Jane Bland, the Republican incumbent, has long had the respect of her peers and the endorsement of this editorial board. The 59-year-old has been a judge for 25 years, first at the Harris County district courts, then on the 1st Court of Appeals and now on the Texas Supreme Court. She received more votes than anyone else in the State Bar of Texas judicial poll, and her numbers in the Houston Bar Association's evaluation are the highest of any statewide judge.

Bland was the lead author of the Texas Supreme Court's unanimous decision in *Zurawski v. Texas*. She told us the court "gave guidance" within the limits of the law the Legislature passed and that "if a pregnant mom has been diagnosed with a physical condition that is life threatening and an abortion is necessary to keep her from physical injury or death, the doctor is protected under the law as it stands now."

The opinion states that the risk of death doesn't have to be imminent and the pregnant woman doesn't have to first suffer physical impairment. That's not enough reassurance for many doctors. Bland noted, "We cannot answer every question that wasn't presented in our case, and for example, many of the laws that were involved are criminal laws," which would be appealed to the Court of Criminal Appeals.

The Democratic candidate, Bonnie Lee Goldstein, 62, also has an impressive depth of experience: 11 years as a municipal judge, six as a civil district judge and three on the 5th District Court of Appeals. J. David Roberson, running as a Libertarian, acknowledged to us that he "can't hold a candle to either of the other candidates' experience."

When asked why she'd be the best candidate for this place, Goldstein said she'd be a "good option." That's true, but we hope voters stick with Bland.



One year after Oct. 7, antisemitism is still all too common

By Brian Strauss and David Lyon

Several years ago, a young man from our Jewish community here in Houston wanted to give back and help make the world a better place, so he decided to join an overseas volunteer program after he graduated from college. When it came time to sign up, however, COVID had shut down the organization's operations. So he enlisted with the Israel Defense Forces instead to help keep the people of Israel safe.

He had only a few months left in his service in an elite IDF combat unit on Oct. 7, when Hamas invaded southern Israel and began slaughtering civilians. He happened to be in the middle of a training exercise that morning, so his helicopter was quickly redirected to one of the many Israeli communities that was under terrorist assault.

His chopper was the first to arrive on the scene. It was fired upon as it closed in on the area and had to make an emergency landing. When he got off the helicopter, he was immediately shot. The bullet cut into his flesh but miraculously missed his heart. The medic next to him was able to keep him alive until he could reach a hospital, where he went through multiple surgeries. After months of rehab and completing his military service, he came back to Texas to continue his academic studies.

There are clearly many remarkable aspects to his story, but one of the most disheartening is the reason we didn't name the young man and that he doesn't want to describe his experience publicly: After risking his life to save civilians from a terrorist assault, he's afraid of the personal attacks and social ostracism he could face on campus as antisemitism has roiled universities here in Texas.

What does it say about our world when this is the response to someone who by any measure is a hero? And what does it say about our own state when scorn and hate greet members of the Jewish community who work to protect their fellow Jews?

The scope of the challenge is astonishing. As the CEO of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations William Daroff pointed out in a recent op-ed, Hillel International has documented over 1,800 antisemitic incidents on college campuses since Oct. 7, the highest number ever recorded in a single academic year. "This staggering statistic represents countless Jewish students who face harassment, intimidation, and violence simply because of their identity," Daroff wrote.

More can be done to keep our students safe. The U.S. Senate should listen to the Jewish community and pass the Antisemitism Awareness Act, which already passed the House of Representatives earlier this year in an overwhelmingly bipartisan vote. The act would give the Department of Education the ability to enforce federal anti-discrimination laws in order to protect Jewish students.

Away from campus, the Houston Jewish community has experienced support and solidarity from many of our local officials, fellow clergy and non-Jewish neighbors over the past year. In particular, the Houston Police Department has been extremely dedicated to our security and well-being. These are people who truly care about us and ensure we're safe. Many have even learned some Hebrew and Yiddish words of greeting.

Still, there's a limit to what public services can provide. Given the very serious threats to Jewish safety here in Houston, we are forced to devote huge amounts of our budgets to creating a safe environment for our members, whether it's installing fences and cameras along the perimeter of our properties or panic buttons in the sanctuary in case of an emergency. We also hire off-duty police officers to be present whenever people are in the building.

And yet, each Sabbath, we have congregants who join our services online instead of coming in person. Many of these people don't feel safe entering a Jewishly identified building. Congress has designated funds for security enhancements to help nonprofit organizations at high risk of a terrorist attack by creating the Nonprofit Security Grant Program, but according to the Jewish Insider, fewer than half of applications for that funding were fulfilled in the 2024 grant cycle. We need to do better.

During the Jewish High Holidays season our security costs only increase. We are blessed with large communities, but in the past that means we've each had to spend over \$100,000 per synagogue just on security for these services. That's only a fraction of our annual security costs, and this year it will surely be higher. It's a price we must pay for the much more valuable cause of gathering and praying together.

When we do assemble, we will tell our congregants that we need to stay the course as a community. We need to stay unified. We need to give people a sense of security, a sense of confidence, a sense of hope. And we need to keep finding ways to contribute to making the world a better place.

Brian Strauss is the senior rabbi of Congregation Beth Yesburun, the largest Conservative synagogue in the United States. David Lyon is the senior rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel and president-elect of the Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis.

BIBLE VERSE

Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Luke 12:33-34

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