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Q&A WITH TEXAS HOUSE DISTRICT 13 CANDIDATE ALBERT HUNTER

Q&A with Texas House candidate Albert Hunter: Retired teacher vows to safeguard schools

Oct 4, 2024

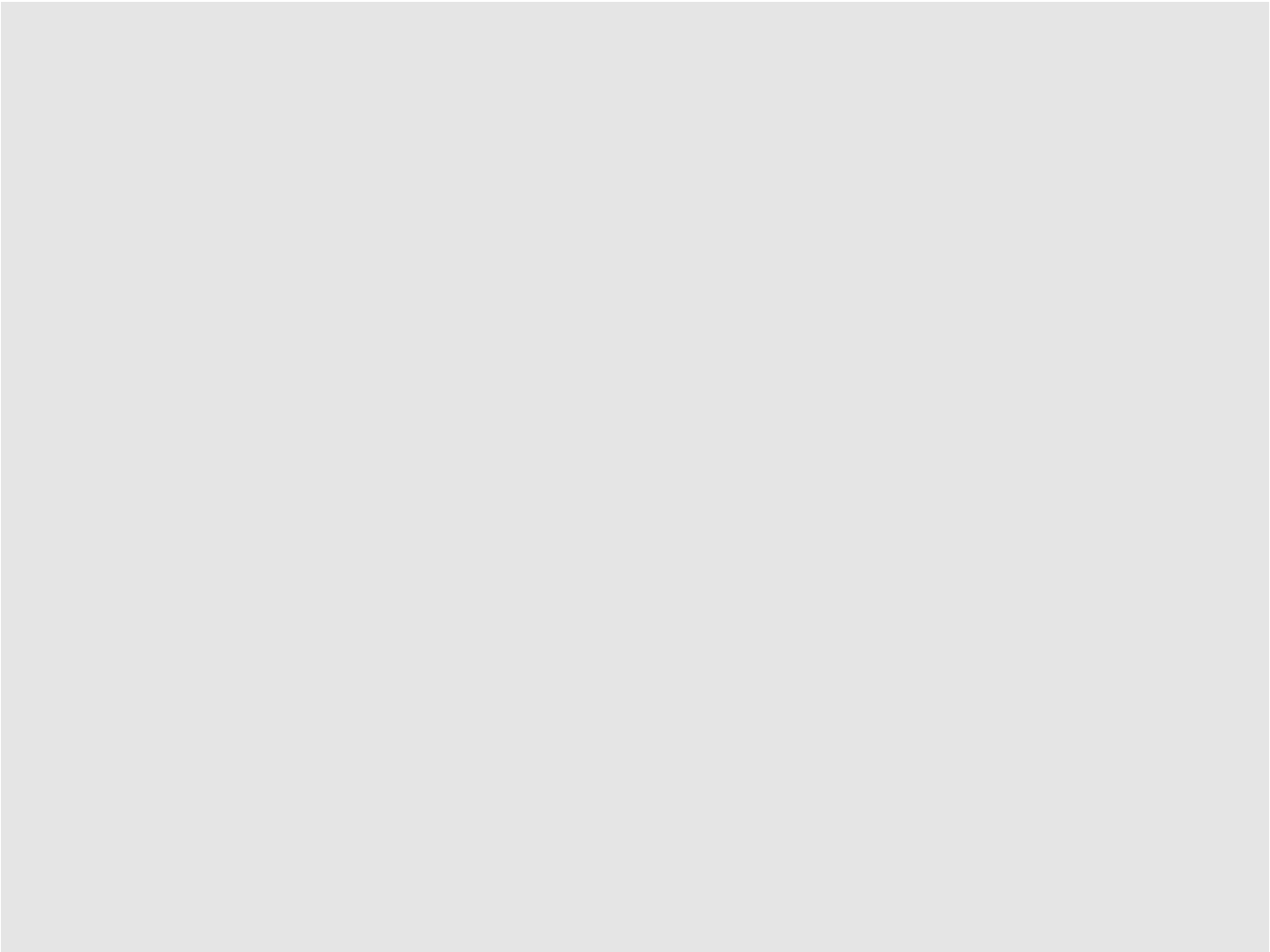
Meridian Independent School District board member and retired classroom teacher Albert Hunter, 67, decided to run as a Democrat for the Texas House of Representatives from District 13 after Republican state Rep. Angelia Orr flipflopped from her 2022 vow to oppose any school voucher bill. Orr was one of just four Republicans who switched to support a voucher bill in November 2023 amid a strong push by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and the Republican Party of Texas, despite significant resistance from many rural constituents. In this Waco Tribune-Herald editorial board interview, Hunter discusses rural reservations about school vouchers in addition to border security, proposed changes in statewide elections, Christian education in public schools and gnawing racial issues in rural, mostly white Texas. Texas House District 13 includes all of Bosque, Falls, Freestone, Hill, Leon and Limestone counties and nearly a fourth of McLennan County, including 28 percent of Waco (including East Waco), Bellmead, Hallsburg, Lacy Lakeview and Mart. Rep. Orr ducked three invitations from the Waco Trib for a sit-down interview left by phone at her regional and Austin offices.

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Q: You decided to run for the Legislature to represent fellow rural constituents in their battle against school vouchers after the Texas House District 13 representative, Angelia Orr of Hillsboro, flipflopped and voted for the school voucher bill. With all due respect to rural Texas, what's wrong with school vouchers given the fact that many public schools are struggling and competition might compel better results?

Albert Hunter: The voucher scam or school choice or whatever they want to call it has a trickle-down effect. Granted, rural schools are not going to be immediately affected. Here in Waco they've got about 13 schools that can pull students from public education. In my rural counties, they don't have that yet, but it still affects the pot [of state funding] because the pot becomes smaller because they're consequently not putting any more money into educational funding. Right now the funding allotment [per pupil in public schools] is \$6,160. But the governor is wanting to give up to \$10,000 for a student to go to a private school. Well, that comes out of the same fund that the \$6,160 for the public school student comes from. So they're taking more out, which means struggling schools that still have to pay the lights, that still have to retain a set number of teachers to teach, will have less. They can't raise their local tax rate up anymore because there's a formula that punishes them or requires them to get permission from constituents to increase the tax rate. The result is that they're going to be cash-strapped for what they have to do and they won't have sufficient funds coming from the state to do it.



A classroom teacher for 26 years and a tennis coach for 13 years, state legislative candidate, Meridian native and Meridian ISD board member Albert Hunter taught math at Cleburne High School, La Vega High School, Morgan High School and Clifton High School before retiring in 2012: "I decided to run because I was an educator and the voucher scam brought me out. I believe strongly in public education and the value of public education."

Rod Aydelotte, Tribune-Herald

Q: Rep. Orr dodges the Waco Trib but has articulated in the past that the reason she flipfopped on her rural constituents and went from opposing the school voucher bill to voting for it is because there was some \$40 million more in the House bill that would have gone to fund schools in Texas House District 13. Isn't that a viable reason for supporting school voucher legislation? Doesn't that meet your approval?

Hunter: No, it doesn't. All of the other provisions that go along with that funding are detrimental to the public education system, negating the claim that, "I'm going to just pass this so teachers can get a raise, that's the only way this is gonna happen." If

you're taking more money from that pot and not increasing it, paying the teachers more simply worsens the overall problem because you can't generate the tax revenue to address what's going on long term. It's like, "I'm giving you \$10 to make you happy, but I'm taking \$100 away from you." And I don't like that correlation anyway because I don't think that was the real reason for her switching her vote. I think her switching her vote was more political to ensure she would not be primaried [as many other Republican legislators defending public schools were in the spring 2024 Republican primary elections].

Q: Amidst all this, it seems many public schools are nonetheless struggling academically. As a school board member in Meridian ISD and a longtime school teacher and sometime substitute teacher in the area, why do you believe this is so?

Hunter: It's kind of twofold. COVID-19 brought to Texas public schools more than \$19 billion in what are called Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds over the last few years. All schools that applied got ESSER funding. That was additional money from the federal government to help run the schools during the pandemic. Well, that funding is up. If they put in place programs to help children, the students, and it's working, and if they then take those funds away and school districts have no other way of pulling that extra money in, that affects the overall budget. A lot of the schools struggling are schools that are dealing with the end of ESSER funding.

Q: Yes, but public schools were struggling even before the pandemic.

Hunter: Yes, but that's because the basic (per-pupil) state allotment has not increased and costs have gone up. So, if you're having to pay teachers more, and you're counting on that basic allotment to help fund teacher pay increases, you have to start cutting back somewhere. The result is you don't have the money to do all the things you want and that means schools have to go back to their fund reserves if they even have fund reserves. There are some school districts that are having to borrow money to make payroll because of this shortage of funds. [EDITOR'S NOTE: Amidst battling over a school voucher bill, the Legislature last year failed to approve a significant boost to

the base amount of money each school receives per student — an amount that hasn't changed since 2019. School administrators say losing pandemic relief funds not only threatens the programs these federal funds temporarily covered but demonstrates the situation that public schools face without increases in state funding.]

Q: During the primary election, the Republican governor campaigned hard against Republican state legislators who voted to strip voucher funding from the education bill. Yet old-style Republican voters who cherish public schools rallied in conservative places such as Abilene and San Angelo to fend off pro-voucher Republican challengers. Can you expect the same support from rural constituents in Bosque and Hill counties where some have similar reservations about vouchers? I mean, will they put aside identity politics and cross partisan lines to vote for you and safeguard public schools?

Hunter: I hope so. I've gotten a lot of support across the district on the voucher controversy. In the Republican primary in Freestone County, if you look at the voter count, there was an undervote of 855 Republicans when it came to (reelecting state Rep. Orr).

Q: It seems likely the governor will have the votes in the 89th legislative session to pass some sort of school voucher bill. Regardless of whether you prevail in your campaign for the Texas Legislature or continue to serve as a school board member for the Meridian ISD, what are one or two safeguards you would demand be in any school voucher bill?

Hunter: It has to be a tiered approach. Rural schools in Bosque County face different challenges than schools here in McLennan County. We have a little bit more need [in Bosque County]. I think it's going to have to be weighted based upon school population. If something like this were to pass — and I'm hearing the same things you are about whether the governor has the votes to pass this or not — you're going to have to weigh the allotment for rural schools differently than a standard, per-pupil \$6,160 state allotment for other schools. That has to change because even though you have the same state formula for educators — I'm talking about your 20-step ladder in

terms of pay [the state minimum salary schedule set by Texas for teachers, full-time librarians, full-time counselors and full-time nurses] — that teacher you hire in Midway ISD where they have the tax base or in Glen Rose, which really doesn't even need state funding because their tax base covers everything — you're still going to have to have that 22-to-1 teacher/student ratio in elementary schools and we're going to have to find a way school districts receive more money to hire the extra personnel when those ratios are exceeded on campuses.

Q: You have a lot of new folks in Bosque County with more moving in all the time. Are people really worked up about the school voucher battle or is it flying under the radar?

Hunter: It's really under the radar. Those most worked up about it are those who were in education or are closely aligned with education where they have kids or grandkids going to public school. They're really more involved with the education itself. I was at the post office with a man I knew very well and taught with when I was up in Cleburne. He saw the campaign sign on my truck. He's an educator and he is for vouchers. He says, "Schools waste money, they waste too much money, the tax money needs to follow the child." And I let him go on, that's his right. I then have to convince him otherwise or at least give him information so he can rethink his position. I said, "How much would you think a person pays in taxes for a kid in school?" Of course, he didn't know. Then I said, "I want to tell you something, I do not know a single person who pays current school taxes that would want to cover what the school voucher plan is wanting to give students to go to a private school." [EDITOR'S NOTE: The final voucher bill of 2023 would have allowed select students statewide who exit public schools to either receive \$10,500 annually for private school expenses or up to \$1,000 for homeschooling while increasing the basic per-pupil allotment for public school students only slightly, from \$6,160 to \$6,700.]

Q: Tom Schaller and Paul Waldman's book "White Rural Rage: The Threat to American Democracy" argues that while rural whites have very legitimate grievances about poor health care options, failing infrastructure and loss of farm jobs, they're increasingly disposed to

xenophobic views and conspiracy theories that don't help address the real problems they face. Consequently, they often vote against their own interests. We constantly see rural-vs.-urban tension played out in the Legislature, including over school vouchers, yet many rural families vote Republican anyway. You're a Black man in a white rural county where Blacks don't represent 2 percent of the population. You live there happily, you're obviously respected sufficiently to get three terms on the Meridian school board. Do you recognize all this?

Hunter: The one thing I can say — and I don't want this interpreted as I'm better than anyone else because I don't feel that way — but I defend myself well. I have a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. Most of what we're talking about here are primarily non-college-educated people. The majority of them have stayed in one spot and never went outside. They're in their comfort zone and don't like people messing with their comfort zone, so they will vote their own beliefs out of fear of the unknown, which is change. For my part, I never left [Bosque County], so to those individuals, I look like one of them mentally, so I can actually fight for them. I can find the answers for them that they couldn't necessarily find themselves.

Q: I notice on your Facebook page most of your supporters are white, but then that's possibly because they're the majority in Bosque County.

Hunter: I have a built-in trust factor among my people in the county. I'll be called to answer questions about things that I'm not necessarily [directly involved] in. "Well, what do you think?" When you look at rural America — and this is not necessarily Bosque County, this is all rural America — most are locals who never left and felt comfortable 30 years ago. And technology and the world are changing so fast around them that they can't always grip what's happening and they're understandably frustrated. And so when someone comes on the scene and says, "I'm going to take you back to that comfort zone," then they're going to vote for that person. They don't realize that going back will actually hurt them instead of helping them. Progress doesn't always prove to be a negative. Progress can occur as a positive, and if you're not one to move along with it, then you're the one who's going to get hurt.

Q: The Republican Party of Texas platform committee has endorsed a “concurrent majority” scheme for statewide elections for governor, attorney general and other state offices. Rather than candidates prevailing if they win a simple majority of individual votes cast across Texas, they would win only if they also win most of the 254 separate county elections of those candidates. Each county would get one electoral vote — and that vote would go to the candidate who won the popular vote in that particular county. Then all these single county votes would be added up to determine the statewide winner. This is obviously meant to undermine the votes of residents living and working in Texas’ urban settings while inflating the value of individual votes in rural counties, a concept which has been repeatedly ruled unconstitutional in the past. This plan would allot each county one vote, whether it’s Loving County in desolate West Texas with just 64 residents or bustling Harris County with 4.7 million residents. What’s your take on this?

Hunter: It’s absolutely asinine. The reason they’re considering such a thing is because the Republican Party has realized one thing: You don’t have to worry about Texas House District 13 but you have to worry about Houston, you have to worry about Dallas, you have to worry about Fort Worth, you have to worry about San Antonio where a whole lot of Texans live. They’ve realized that those are Democratic strongholds. In Bosque County, we’ve got a population of 20,000 with about 10,000 registered voters. It’s going to vote red. Under this Republican scheme, that’s one point [per county] toward an election. Now, you go up to Fort Worth, they’ve got 900,000 people if not a million. And yet this system would give all those people the same [electoral] weight as the population in Bosque County. So if the Republican Party can get enough of these little bitty counties where people aren’t necessarily paying attention, the Republican Party doesn’t have to worry about all those people up there in Fort Worth and Dallas and Austin and Houston. They’re no longer bothered about the popular vote. If you go back to the national scene, remember: Donald Trump won the presidency in 2016 without winning the popular vote. George W. Bush won the presidency in 2000 even though he didn’t win the vote of the

people. This proposal would guarantee a Republican victory in every statewide election for the rest of our lives if they can pass that in the Texas Legislature. For the record, taking these very same dynamics, I have to work extremely hard in Limestone and Freestone counties whereas right now all I've got to really do is take East Waco and Hill County and the election is mine and by a popular vote of the people.

Q: You mentioned the nature of the district. How do you see a victory coming about for you? Winning part of McLennan County and Bosque County?

Hunter: I'm not going to win Bosque County.

Q: You're kidding! So you're pinning your hopes on McLennan and Hill counties and breaking even everywhere else?

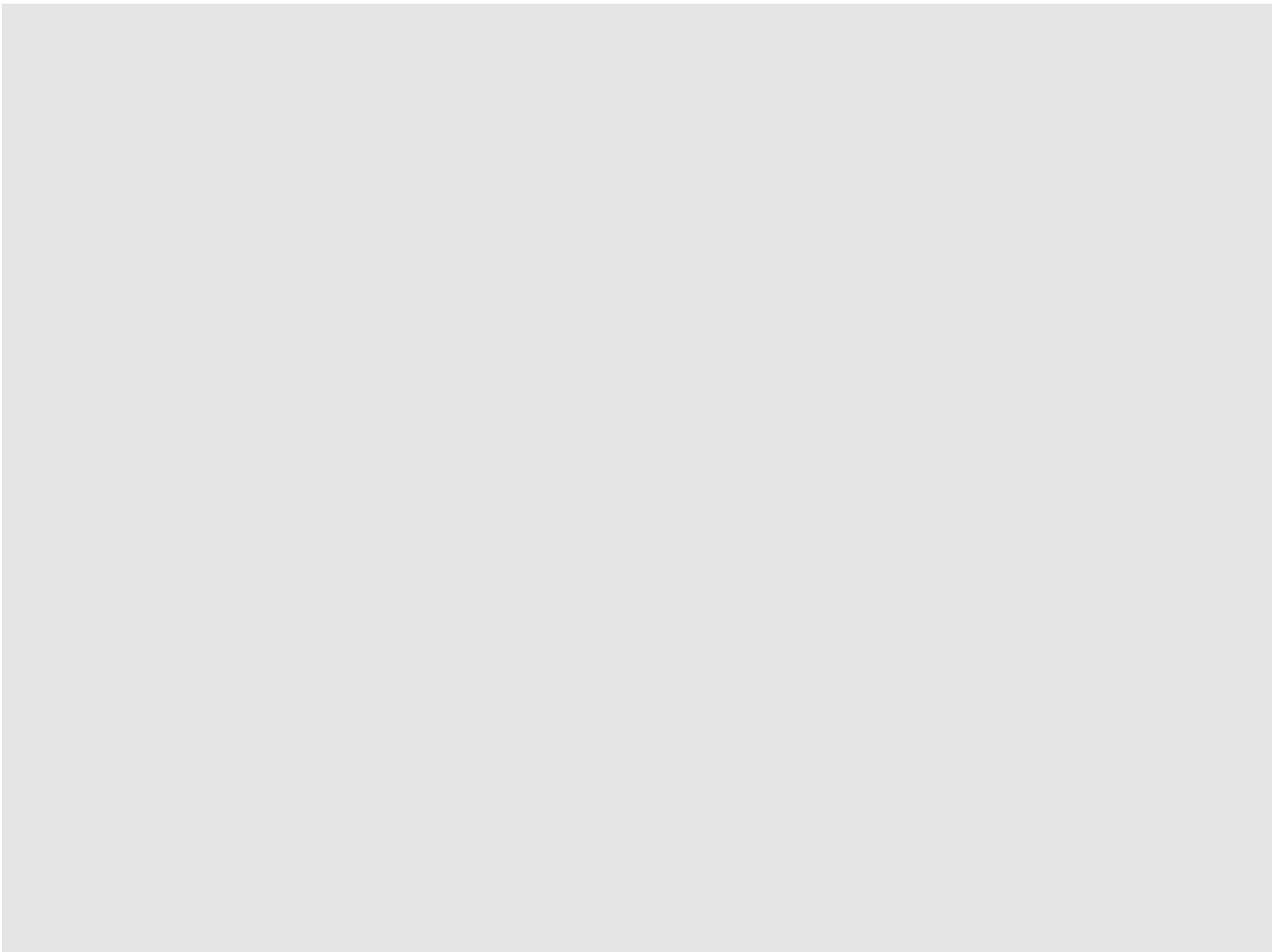
Hunter: Beyond those counties, picking up votes wherever I can.

Q: You say that when you and fellow residents come up to each other in the street in Meridian, Texas, they know and see you as one of them. Why then would white neighbors living in Bosque County — specifically in Meridian — not vote for you but instead vote for someone in Hill County who flip-flopped and arguably voted against their own interests regarding public schools? I don't understand.

Hunter: I don't understand it either, but I can give you an example. I was in Cranfills Gap visiting a friend of mine I went to high school with. I sang in the choir with her, hung out with her, she hugs me, talks to me, hangs on to me. And I say, "Hey, I'm running for Texas House District 13." And she says, "Oh, that's great, that's wonderful." But when I told her I was a Democrat, she said, "Oh, well, I can't vote for you." And it was because I was a Democrat.

Q: What's it going to take to break that sort of thinking?

Hunter: It's going to take knowledge, the knowledge that what they see on Fox News and such is broken. The steady repetition of misinformation and disinformation has really changed a lot of them. In 2008 Bosque County was a Democratic county. I held a caucus in which we had nine delegates to the state convention. They all turned out, 31 people, to be the largest caucus they ever had. They turned out to make sure that all nine delegate votes went for Hillary Clinton in 2008.



Q: Here's an interesting passage from the Republican Party of Texas platform: "We demand school administrators and officials protect the rights of students and staff to pray and engage in religious speech, individually or in groups, on school property, without government interference. We urge the Legislature and the State Board of Education to require instruction on the Bible, servant leadership and Christian self-governance. We support the use of chaplains in schools to counsel and give guidance from a traditional biblical perspective based on Judeo-

Christian principles with the informed consent of a parent.” This makes me wonder if churches and parents are failing so abysmally in religious matters that schools must also take up religious instruction. Should schools be transformed into appendages of Christian churches? I mean, you’re a school board member and presumably in touch with a lot of parents and teachers.

Hunter: I was raised a Baptist and still proclaim to be a Baptist. I may not be a regular Sunday attendee. I also believe in the separation of church and state. I believe that you cover religion at home because when you introduce religion into the schools, the question ultimately arises: Whose religion are we going to be using? If I was raised as a Baptist, I may not agree with Catholic or Methodist teachings. You may have someone who comes from a Buddhist influence. Whose religion are you going to force on the children?

Q: Reminds me of August 2015 when Gov. Abbott, a Catholic, unwittingly triggered a Facebook brawl between Protestants and Catholics by simply posting a celebratory comment involving the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, an annual Holy Day of Obligation for Roman Catholics on which they are obliged to attend Mass or Divine Liturgy. One Protestant got on there and wrote: “It’s not Scripture-based. It’s idolatry. Dead people cannot do anything for anyone. Satan is a great and cunning deceiver; he kills, steals and destroys. Don’t buy into his lies!” A Catholic then posted: “Mary was conceived without sin, you idiot, so she could be the mother of God. You need some Catholic slapped into you. Too bad you won’t ever get to see her. Oh, Mary, conceived without sin, pray for this jerk.” So, sure, I can see how this Republican platform proposal would work out just fine!

Hunter: This isn’t the first time this has come up in public education. In public schools they used to have the Pledge of Allegiance and then a prayer. If you remember, we used to have a prayer at football games. And they stopped it on the argument of separating church and state. But then they came back and said that, well,

if it was student-led and non-denominational, we could. So now a lot of schools have stopped it and just gone to a moment of silence, so through that they're trying to address the matter of all these different religions so that no one feels uncomfortable. What they're not understanding is there's such a large majority of people who belong to no religion and now you're forcing them into a religious doctrine they're simply not comfortable with. And that's their right. Freedom of religion is in the Constitution, so therefore you cannot do that, even though I certainly had no problem with a Baptist prayer. I really have no problem with it. I just don't want it in my schools because I want those children there for an education and I don't want them to feel uncomfortable about all the differences in religion. I would have loved to have taught in a religious school. I wouldn't have minded going to Reicher (Catholic School), it's just too far (in mileage) for me to go to. But in a public school with public dollars from Presbyterians and Church of Christ and all the whatevers out there, they deserve to know their children are not going to have someone else's religion forced upon them.

Q: The Legislature has spent billions of dollars trying to secure the border, sometimes complementing what the federal government does, sometimes not. Whether we have a President Trump or a President Harris in January, we remain at ground zero regarding border security and immigration. What would you recommend?

Hunter: First of all, it's a federal issue, not a state issue, because we're a part of the United States. That's an issue that is governed and regulated through an agreement of nations, at least to a degree. All of them agree to the same thing. It's just that our country has opportunities that some of the others don't have as far as immigration status goes, so those people coming over here, a lot of them are coming because of opportunity and freedom. Sure, you get a mix of good and bad. But we had a congressional immigration package considered this year — perhaps not the greatest but it was something that would have worked and made matters better. [EDITOR'S NOTE: Former President Trump ordered Republican lawmakers to kill the bill, largely authored by conservative Republican Sen. James Lankford.] My concern is why are Venezuelans, why are Cubans, why are people from all these other countries

coming through Mexico to the United States without being stopped? They're going through another country to get to us. Why is Mexico not stopping them at their borders? My opinion is we are now in a world where everyone has to be in agreement about certain rules. I'm not going to say Trump did this even though he did, but when you tick off Mexico, the attitude [by Mexican leaders consequently] seems to be, "Not my problem, come on through." It's not that we have open borders. These people are coming over understanding the law as to what they can and cannot do. That's why they made the trip. And the numbers are so overwhelming that now we can't stop the bad guys. If we had had a good working relationship with Mexico or hadn't ticked them off, they would have stopped them for us because populations of immigrants coming through their country almost certainly creates problems for Mexico before they get to our own border. So unless and until we start getting to be good neighbors and working things out with Mexican officials, we're going to continue having these problems. And that's really an administrative thing outside of Texas. Now once they get into Texas, we have laws that can take care of them. But we can't stop them at the border. That's federal. But once they come inside, such as in Waco, we have laws to take care of that.

Interview conducted by Tribune-Herald Editor Steve Boggs, Managing Editor J.B. Smith and retired Opinion Editor Bill Whitaker. This interview has been condensed and edited for brevity and clarity.