



Subscribe

Advertisement

Close

OPINION

# The good old boys of the State Police | Editorial

Updated: Apr. 30, 2023, 9:40 p.m. | Published: Apr. 30, 2023, 7:15 a.m.



It sure sounds like the promotions system is a rigged game that bypasses merit, in which the head of the State Police is a primary offender. (Rob Spahr | File Photo)

201  
shares

By **Star-Ledger Editorial Board**

The New Jersey State Police have a troubling history of racism, one that was finally confronted after troopers shot and seriously wounded a group of unarmed young Black and Hispanic men during an infamous traffic stop in 1998. It prompted a settlement that established oversight by the U.S. Department of Justice and a slew of good reforms.

But now, more than a decade after federal oversight ended, credible evidence has emerged indicating that the bad old days are returning, that white officers with troubled records are winning promotion over more qualified troopers of color, that

these decisions are not based on merit, but on who you know. And in the State Police, the person in power is almost always a white male. It's the old boys club, and the tolerance of bad behavior by white officers is almost as alarming as the unfair treatment of those outside the club.

The allegations are contained in a pile of disturbing lawsuits from troopers of color, including senior players who are widely considered credible. Their claims point to a failure at the senior levels of the State Police and raise serious questions about the leadership of the man Gov. Murphy has kept in charge, Col. Patrick Callahan. And it's a new test for Attorney General Matthew Platkin, whose office says a years-long review of State Police promotional practices is still ongoing.

"It's all a big frat house," says lawyer Michelle Douglass, who represents minority troopers who say they were passed over for promotion and discriminated against. "And another thing that I find egregious is that my clients are getting bypassed for people who are not only less qualified than them, but who have disciplinary records that are pretty difficult to ignore."

Among the plaintiffs is Major Brian Polite, a well-respected veteran trooper who's served as a top spokesman for State Police. Polite, who is Black, says he was passed over for promotions and subjected to racist taunts from his white colleagues. Not only did top brass know about this, he says, but one of the guys lobbing these insults is Callahan's right-hand man, Sean Kilcommons, the second in command of the State Police.

First, Callahan bypassed Polite and instead promoted Kilcommons as lieutenant colonel, a man who is "less qualified" and Callahan's "close friend," the lawsuit alleges. Then, at a retirement party, Kilcommons told a woman who worked for Polite – in front of several witnesses – that there would soon be changes at the State Police, and that Polite "is gonna s—t his underwear."

"His underwear is gonna be darker than his skin," Kilcommons allegedly said.

After gaining command over Polite, the lawsuit says Kilcommons stripped Polite of his duties overseeing recruiting for the division. And it accuses Kilcommons of trying to undo the progress Polite's section has made with minority communities through recruiting and outreach.

A white captain, Phil Stolfa, also allegedly made a racist comment about Polite at a meeting, referring to him as the "H.N.I.C" – short for "head n-word in charge" of the unit. This was in front of a Black lieutenant who was visibly upset by it. Stolfa

apologized, according to the lawsuit, but his behavior did nothing to derail his progress in the department – after this incident, he got a prestigious transfer to another unit where he'd have more people under his command, including Black troopers and other minorities. It perpetuates the notion that some people “get protection or soft landings,” according to the lawsuit.

State Police won't comment, citing the pending litigation. Complaints like these have been raised for decades in this 85% white male organization, but Polite's credible allegations directly implicate the top brass. And they come after we recently learned State Police were allowing officers with assault and domestic violence records to serve as mentors to rookie troopers, according to a state comptroller's report.

They're promoting people to supervisory positions whose offenses would preclude them from even being hired as an entry-level trooper. Like Major Christian Dreyer, who was suspended for two years and faced aggravated assault charges after he allegedly beat up a girl, partially collapsing her lung; he also beat up a young man after allegedly asking for oral sex, according to a report in Newsweek, which first broke the story of these lawsuits. Yet he was still promoted several times.

“This is the culture,” Bishop Jethro James, a senior pastor of the Paradise Baptist Church in Newark and longtime chaplain with the State Police, told us. “They promote folks that don't look like me, that have drinking problems, that leave guns in the car, that have spouse or girlfriend abuse problems. In this state, you can't even get a gun permit to carry if you have a domestic violence charge – how do these people get promoted?”

He continued, “You have a guy that's been there 19 years that has Nazi tattoos.” A trooper who only recently fell under investigation because photos of his neck tattoo released online attracted public attention, he noted. “I mean, how do you not know? He never changed his shirt?”

These are questions for Col. Callahan, who is facing a sudden spate of lawsuits by at least 17 plaintiffs – including troopers who are Black, Latino, women, gay and have disabilities – who all say they were passed over for promotion in favor of less seasoned, less decorated white men.

This could cost taxpayers bigtime. And it only becomes harder to recruit minorities when they don't see other people like them in top brass. It sure sounds like the promotions system is a rigged game that bypasses merit, in which the head of the

State Police is a primary offender. And it's Attorney General Platkin's job to fix this, rather than wait for these suits to drag out. We can't let reform just become a paper exercise. Clean up the State Police.

*Our journalism needs your support. Please [subscribe today to NJ.com](#).*

*Bookmark [NJ.com/Opinion](#). Follow on Twitter [@NJ\\_Opinion](#) and find [NJ.com Opinion on Facebook](#).*

Powered by [Advance 360 Insights](#)

1 of 4

## How important an issue is reducing crime in your decisions about whom to vote for in state and local elections?

- It will strongly influence my decision
- It is not an important issue
- I do not believe it should be a priority
- It is the most important issue

Next

To understand how we may use the results of this poll, please read our [Privacy Policy](#) and [User Agreement](#). This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

If you purchase a product or register for an account through one of the links on our site, we may receive compensation.

Sponsor Content

**[Celebrate National Historic Preservation Month in New Jersey, a leader in site preservation](#)**

Landmarks allow visitors to see how those who came before us lived while learning more about the state's early days.

Journey Through Jersey



## ▼ About Us

[About NJ.com](#)

[Advertise with us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Jobs at NJ Advance Media](#)

---

## ▼ Subscriptions

[NJ.com](#)

[The Star-Ledger](#)

[The Times of Trenton](#)

[South Jersey Times](#)

[The Jersey Journal](#)

[Newsletters](#)

---

## ▼ Already a Subscriber

[Manage your Subscription](#)

[Place a Vacation Hold](#)

[Make a Payment](#)

[Delivery Feedback](#)

---

## ▼ NJ.com Sections

[N.J. News](#)

[Local News](#)

[N.J. Politics](#)

[Sports](#)

[High School Sports](#)

[Entertainment](#)

[Food & Recipes](#)

[Events](#)

[Business](#)

[Opinion](#)

[Jersey's Best](#)

[Legal Notices](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[Jobs](#)

[Autos](#)

[Real Estate](#)

[Rentals](#)

[Classifieds](#)

[Special Sections](#)

[Local Life](#)

---

## ▼ Contribute to NJ.com

[Submit an event](#)

---

## ▼ Follow Us

[YouTube](#)

[Facebook](#)

[RSS](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)

---

## ▼ More on NJ.com

[Place an ad](#)

[Sell your car](#)

[Post a job](#)

[Sell/rent your home](#)

[Apartments & rentals](#)

[Weather](#)

[Site map](#)

[Sponsor Content](#)

[Search](#)

[NJ.com Store](#)

[Archives](#)

---

## ▼ Newspaper stories and photos

[Learn more about our newspapers](#)

[The Star-Ledger](#)

[The Times of Trenton](#)

[The Jersey Journal](#)

[South Jersey Times](#)

[Hunterdon County Democrat](#)

---

## ▼ Mobile

[iPhone, Android apps](#)

---



Use of and/or registration on any portion of this site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#) (updated 4/4/2023), [Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement](#), and [Your Privacy Choices and Rights](#) (updated 1/26/2023).

[Cookies Settings](#)

© 2023 Advance Local Media LLC. All rights reserved ([About Us](#)).

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Advance Local.

[Community Rules](#) apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site.

YouTube's privacy policy is available [here](#) and YouTube's terms of service is available [here](#).

[▶ Ad Choices](#)