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TROUBLES AT THE TOP

Saying “no” costs Alaska’s top cop his job



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. In his second year as Alaska’s public safety commissioner, [Walt Monegan](#) thought that his meeting with Governor Sarah Palin’s chief of staff would be about security for her forthcoming picnics. Instead he was asked to take over the Alcoholic Beverage Control board. When he politely declined - - after all, he already had his dream job -- he found out that, no, he didn’t.

Monegan, a former Anchorage police chief, was hired by the new Governor shortly after her 2006 election. By all appearances he took to his duties well, even earning plaudits from the police union. So what happened? [According to Palin’s flacks](#) she just wanted to move the department “in a new direction.” But within days the *Anchorage Daily News* was reporting another reason: Monegan was let go because he refused to fire the Governor’s ex-brother in law, a State Trooper who was going through a nasty custody battle with Palin’s sister.

Palin instantly denied it. “To allege that I, or any member of my family, requested, received or released confidential personnel information on an Alaska State Trooper, or directed disciplinary action be taken against any employee of the Department of Public Safety, is, quite simply, outrageous.” Skeptical journalists began looking into the story. In a [series of eye-popping exposes](#), reporters discovered evidence of a vendetta against the trooper dating back to the days when Sarah Palin was a small-town mayor.

A year before her election to Governor she, her husband and family had accused the trooper of misdeeds ranging from drunken driving (a crime that Palin’s hubby was

once convicted of) to zapping a son with a Taser. In March 2006, following an [inquiry](#) that the *Daily News* characterized as befitting a homicide investigation, the trooper was suspended for ten days, later reduced to five. As for the trooper, he remains on the job. His only [public comment](#) came recently, when he told a CNN news crew that he doesn't harbor Palin any ill will but feels "extremely stressed" that confidential personnel actions were revealed and that his past is now fodder for gossip.

Evidence of shenanigans continues to mount. Palin was [recently forced](#) to place one of her top aides on leave for pressuring a Trooper lieutenant to move against her ex-brother in law (she denies being the instigator.) Palin, now a vice-presidential candidate, doesn't seem worried. Deferring to the demands imposed by her new status, the Alaska legislative body investigating Monegan's firing [decided not to subpoena](#) Palin, leaving her to be questioned by investigators. Even that seems uncertain, as the private lawyer the State hired to defend the Governor [has challenged](#) the legislature's authority to look into her conduct, claiming that it's only a personnel squabble.

Meanwhile Alaska still lacks a permanent top cop. Monegan's replacement, former Kenai police chief Charles Kopp only lasted two weeks, when revelations of an alleged past incident of sexual harassment forced him to resign. At this writing Palin's appointed a panel to search for her third public safety commissioner in three months.

Whomever they select, the underlying problem won't go away. To Governors and their staffs top cops are just like any other political appointees, who are expected to cooperate and do what's asked. An excellent example of what can happen when State police chiefs "go along to get along" is last year's [Troopergate](#) imbroglio, where disgraced former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer got former State Police Superintendent [Preston Felton](#) to use his officers to try to dig up embarrassing information against Spitzer's arch-nemesis, Senate majority leader Joseph Bruno.

Although Troopergate wasn't what led Spitzer to resign from office this past March (his downfall was a big bucks call girl), it precipitated a wide-ranging investigation by the State Commission on Public Integrity, resulting in heavy fines and the end of several careers, among them Superintendent Felton's, who retired.

Lest one think that the West is above such problems, consider the travails of the celebrated California Highway Patrol. In 2008, following a three-year tenure charitably described as "troubled," Commissioner [Mike Brown](#) resigned. He had replaced Dwight "Spike" Helmick, whom Governor Schwarzenegger elbowed aside amidst allegations that command officers were taking unearned medical retirements.

Brown was then done in by [scandals](#) involving conflicts of interest and the improper awarding of millions of dollars in contracts. After bringing in the failed leader's deputy, Joseph Farrow, to run the CHP, Schwarzenegger promoted Brown to be deputy secretary for public safety of California's Business, Transportation and Housing agency, which oversees the CHP. Naturally, Brown got a raise.

Hubert Acevedo must be laughing his head off. Now police chief in Austin, Texas, Acevedo recently [settled a lawsuit](#) against the State of California for \$995,000. Who authorized the payment? Shwarzenegger. He had little choice, as an [investigation](#) by the State Personnel Board confirmed that Acevedo, once the CHP's number two man in Los Angeles, had been mercilessly harassed for blowing the whistle on the shenanigans that forced Hemlick to resign. Among those cited for acting "to cause maximum stress, embarrassment and damage to [Acevedo's] reputation" was Helmick.

One could go on, but the point's been made. Most of the academic attention on police misconduct and corruption has been focused on local cops. But it seems that there may be equal reasons to be concerned about supposedly more "professional" State agencies, and particularly at the top, where political considerations can nurture corruption and self-dealing. Just how far this problem extends is an issue that needs to be addressed.