



## COLUMNIST

# Al Alvarez and the Self-Hire Theory

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As the select legislative investigating committee struggled unsuccessfully to identify the individual responsible for the hiring of Albert Alvarez despite **allegations of sexual assault** lodged against him, one of the members, partly out of humor and partly out of frustration, suggested wryly that perhaps Alvarez had hired himself.

That theory no longer seems so far-fetched.

Alvarez stood accused of sexually assaulting fellow Murphy for Governor campaign worker Katie Brennan in April 2017, a charge the Hudson County Prosecutor's Office declined to pursue. He served on the newly-elected governor's transition team and ultimately was appointed to the

\$140,000 a year position of chief of staff to the Schools Development Authority, even though none of the governor's top staff could shed any light on how he got there, all denied any responsibility for hiring him and professed ignorance when asked who did.

During the transition period, Alvarez served as deputy director of personnel, a position in which he gained intimate knowledge of the hiring process followed in determining who received job offers, where potential hires would be placed and at what salary level.

He would have certainly been aware of any loopholes or flaws in the process and how they could have been exploited and the established regulatory process circumvented.

Lynn Haynes, who worked with Alvarez in the transition office, testified that it was Alvarez who informed her that he'd been hired to the SDA position. Her testimony was similar to that of Jose Lozano, transition committee chairman, who told the committee last month that he was unaware of the circumstances surrounding Alvarez' appointment.

Haynes told the committee that only three individuals were authorized to approve top level staff hires — former chief of staff Peter Cammarano, Chief Counsel Matt Platkin and Lozano. All have steadfastly denied they approved Alvarez' appointment and disclaimed any knowledge of who did.

It is possible that, given his role in the personnel operation in the transition office and knowledge of the system followed to approve job placement, Alvarez could have prepared the paperwork for his own hiring, informed both Haynes and Lozano of his appointment and appeared at the SDA office to begin his duties there.

In the words of the committee member: "Alvarez hired himself."

The theory was bolstered somewhat by the report released yesterday by former Supreme Court Justice Peter Verniero that it was common knowledge following Murphy's election that Alvarez joining the new administration was "a foregone conclusion."

His relationship with Murphy was well known and there would have been no reason to question his appointment or to attempt to learn how it came about. It was widely assumed and accepted he'd be offered a high-level position.

Verniero, who had been retained by the governor to review the administration's hiring procedures and practices, was also unable to discover who — if anyone — approved Alvarez' hiring.

The former justice criticized the governor's staff for failing to act more rapidly and decisively to address Brennan's accusations, attributing it to their belief that confidentiality prevented further involvement. It was an error in judgment, Verniero said.

When the full impact of the assault charge against Alvarez became clear, it was recommended to him in March of 2018 that he leave his position. He remained, however, for another six months at full salary until he abruptly resigned in October when contacted by a reporter for the Wall Street Journal, seeking comment on Brennan's allegations.

The failure of anyone in the Administration to follow up and assure that Alvarez was separated from state employment remains a mystery.

Alvarez has denied Brennan's charges and has refused to appear before the committee or to submit to an interview by Verniero.

The entire episode has placed the Administration in an exceedingly poor light, portraying a staff which was clearly rattled by the assault accusation and dealt with it by largely shifting blame to others.

The governor was kept in the dark while the staff floundered about until taking refuge in a finding by the Attorney General's office that no investigation could be undertaken because neither Brennan nor Alvarez was a state employees at the time of the alleged assault and the incident did not occur on state property.

In the meantime, the legislative investigating committee has grown increasingly frustrated over its inability to learn who approved hiring Alvarez.

The co-chair suggested that the continued denials on the part of Administration, campaign and transition officials have cast deepening suspicions of a cover-up scheme and raised what is a relatively minor question to a wildly disproportionate level.

If all the testimony thus far is truthful — and there's been no irrefutable evidence offered that it is not — it seems increasingly likely that the answer to the question was the one offered partly in jest and partly in earnest: "Al Alvarez hired himself."

*Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.*

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