

# US MOVES TO CATCH HORSES JUST AFTER THEY ESCAPE THE BARN

After Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was overthrown, Tunisians started looking for the money he looted from Tunisia and discovered much of it was in our allies' pockets.

After Hosni Mubarak was overthrown, the US started looking around for the money he looted from Egypt and discovered some of it was probably in our – or our allies' – pockets.

After Moammar Qaddafi was overthrown, Libyans started looking around for the money he looted from Libya and discovered some of it was probably in our allies' pockets.

With Bashar al-Assad, the search has already begun and ... unsurprisingly a western bank is known to have hidden some of his associates' money, yet we're doing little about that.

In all of these cases, it has proven difficult, after the fact, to reclaim the looted money and often placed in Western banks' safe-keeping.

With Viktor Yanukovich, the US has rolled a new approach: to try to find the money he looted just as he is overthrown, rather than weeks and months later after he has secured it from reach.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is creating a "financial SWAT team" to rush to troubled countries in the aftermath of a revolution and track suspected stolen assets as part of a new White House push to help fledgling democracies.

The effort, described by U.S. officials and to be formally announced Tuesday by Attorney General [Eric Holder](#), is part of a new strategy designed to speed up the investigation and prosecution of deposed foreign leaders who are suspected of

looting their nation's finances and abscond with the money, often billions of dollars.

"In situations like this, you're really in a race against time before the evidence is destroyed, before assets disappear, and there's no substitute for getting people on the ground as quickly as possible," said David O'Neil, head of the Justice Department's criminal division.

About a dozen U.S. agents and analysts will be assigned to the initiative, which involves chasing bank accounts, homes and luxury cars bought by foreign leaders and helping local authorities piece together criminal prosecutions of former officials.

I'm actually all in favor of FBI developing these teams. But I wonder whether it might be still easier for them to do their job if they tried to capture the horse while it was still standing in the barn stall? And why limit it to dictators we didn't like who have been recently overthrown? If looting is wrong, then why not crack down on it generally?

Meanwhile, consider the dance that happens where, as with Putin, you're trying to use that looting to exert control, to disrupt relations of power. In advance of yesterday's new Russia sanctions, Peter Baker did a big profile of both how certain Treasury is it has found Putin's wealth, but how uncertain they are that they've got the proof (though see Sibel Edmonds on that). There is a subtle difference between the money and the power, and following the money in this case may stop just short of hurting Putin badly enough to convince him to act. Not to mention, many powerful people in Europe are not yet ready to crack down as seriously as they'd need to. Their power relies on Russian power.

As more and more people focus on the rise of

inequality – globally, but finally we care about that because it is accelerating here at home – we still seem to struggle with the calculations of power that would require upending that system, even as it continues to destabilize country after country.