

The Columbus Dispatch (Ohio)

April 13, 2012 Friday

Kenyon conference tests U.S. nation-building efforts

By Justin Conley, THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

After a wave of revolution swept the Middle East last year, academics at Kenyon College questioned the U.S. policy of promoting democracy overseas.

Tom Karako, director of the Center for the Study of American Democracy at the school, said involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the Arab Spring revolutions that rolled through countries such as Yemen and Egypt, prompted them to re-evaluate U.S. foreign policy.

The three-day conference "Should America Promote Democracy Abroad?" began yesterday and will include panels and remarks from representatives of universities and colleges, think tanks and private companies.

Delivering the keynote address and kicking off the conference, former U.S. ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad spoke as though exporting democracy was a foregone conclusion, but also a road full of pitfalls.

"I believe that opening the Arab world provides opportunity for reform and transformation, but that's not inevitable," Khalilzad said.

Khalilzad, who was ambassador to Iraq, Afghanistan and the United Nations under President George W. Bush, detailed the security and economic problems the U.S. faced in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"How it comes out affects the security of everyone," Khalilzad said. "Clearly we had to do our best to promote the establishment of democratic order."

Khalilzad, who founded the Project for New American Century and sits on the board of the National Endowment for Democracy, has been an outspoken advocate for the installation of democratic governments and pro-American regimes throughout the Middle East.

In a 2011 opinion piece in The Washington Post, Khalilzad accused President Barack Obama of failing to capitalize on the Arab Spring, saying he "has failed to offer opposition movements in countries with anti-American regimes -- notably Libya -- sufficient support to prevail."

Khalilzad also called for U.S. intervention in Egypt and Tunisia to "[provide] liberal parties and civil society groups with assistance to counter the aid that Iranians and others provide to Islamist parties."

Malou Innocent, a foreign-policy analyst with the **Cato Institute**, said conservatives such as Khalilzad are in an odd position when they advocate government exportation of democracy while railing against government-sponsored domestic programs such as Medicare.

"I'm actually kind of shocked," Innocent said. "Personally, I think it's very hypocritical and very contradictory."

Innocent said there are moral questions on whether the U.S. should "export democracy at the barrel of a gun."

"Historical records indicate that attempts to spread liberal democracy via military occupation will fail more often than they will work," Innocent said. She cited a 2008 Rand Corp. study, for which Khalilzad worked as an analyst in the 1990s, that concluded that attempts at nation-building after World War II failed 71 percent of the time.

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