

Nov 04, 2016 by [Nancy Snow](#)

The People's Ambassador ^[1]

The State Department announced Thursday that figure skater Michelle Kwan would become a public diplomacy ambassador representing sports and U.S. values to the world. The 26-year-old five time world champion who vaulted onto the world figure skating stage at 15 is now a graduate student in political science and international relations at the University of Denver, alma mater of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Kwan seems like a good safe choice to represent U.S. values in diversity and sports excellence. From all I've seen of Kwan in the media, she seems a warm and gracious person and will likely do us proud.

However I'm not sure if she alone can clean up the mess we've made by linking public diplomacy to the Bush war on terror.

As [Martha Bayles](#) wrote in *The Sun* November 8th:

"Today, the chief messages of U.S. public diplomacy -- that to fight terrorism, America must occupy Iraq, restrict visas, and suspend legal protections for both prisoners and citizens are seen as 'big lies' by millions of people around the world. We can keep repeating this message, or we can change tack. Either way, our purpose is not well served by political correctness, on the left or on the right."

Despite a blue-tilting Congress and the resignation of Rumsfeld, the proof of our unpopular foreign policies in the world continues unabated.

I nominate someone who provides a face of the United States in the world that is decidedly politically incorrect. He may not have been the first person Dr. Rice or Karen Hughes thought of to help improve our image in the world. Actually, I'm sure he wasn't even on their Top 10 list. I'd like to think he is equally competent to Ms. Kwan to handle the ambassadorial duties. He holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University, is a WWII veteran, and his resume includes countless random and purposive acts of representing the oft-touted U.S. values of free speech, free press, and social justice. He's neither left nor right, but a radical (getting at the roots) truth-teller about why our national image remains checkered. Howard Zinn, author of the million-seller *A People's History of the United States* and *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, spoke in Orange County to an overflow crowd at Chapman University in Orange, California. I hadn't seen him since the last time he was in The OC. His speech led to several standing ovations, and I know he'd be a big hit overseas. He wouldn't teach figure skating, maybe citizen activism and dissent.

First thing you need to know about Howard Zinn is that he's an eternally-young octogenarian (I hope he doesn't mind my sharing his age range!), funny and sharp. The longtime Massachusetts resident and professor emeritus of Boston University opened with this: "When I told people I was coming to the OC, they said, really?" The OC continues to hold a conservative/reactionary image in the rest of the country, a stereotypical label with which I can

commiserate as a native Southerner. Zinn looked out on the packed crowd and declared that this must be where the underground was meeting tonight. We laughed and cheered, so hungry we were for someone to make sense out of utter nonsense in government, media, violence, and war.

He reminded us that this is no time to take a break from advocating for our rights as citizens just because we have more balance-of-power in Washington. Remember, he said, we all learned in grade school that there were three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial. The comforting narrative we were told was if one branch got too big and powerful, the other two would put it in check. It made us smile and feel good about ourselves as children. The American government would make everything all right. We even put declarations of war in the hands of Congress, ostensibly closer to the people's will. So why do presidents, who occupy that other branch of government, keep carrying us off to undeclared wars?

Wars, not peace, and their subsidiaries, profits, not people, are seen as the eternal American values in the eyes of the world. People ambassadors like Zinn advocate a life-affirming and dignified option.

Prof. Zinn makes us ask critical questions: How many of us really wanted to go to war with Iraq? How many of us cringed when we saw Secretary of State Colin Powell do his show-and-tell presentation to the United Nations, a speech that he later deeply regretted? How many of us shuddered in fear from what then National Security adviser Rice said was the possibility of a "mushroom cloud" over Iraq if we didn't act soon enough? The Bush 48-hour ultimatum speech to Saddam Hussein was as much an ultimatum on our humanity. We can't be all that surprised that our presence in Iraq perpetuates U.S. unpopularity in that region, much less the world. Deep down we know that this war on terror has only increased terror. How many of us remain afraid to speak out against perpetual war and violence in the name of peace, humanitarianism and nonviolence? Why is war the patriotic American value and dissent against war subversive?

Do we, as Zinn asked the OC crowd, want to be known as the military superpower or the humanitarian superpower? If we prefer humanitarian, then we cannot count on any one election to change our image from feared superpower to beloved exemplar of what's right, honorable, and just.

We're still under (pre)occupation as a people led to a war of choice by a now discredited wartime president. We're still sending men and women volunteers to Iraq to fight for what they're told, and often repeat, is our country's security and safety. The commander in chief of those armed forces says we're fighting the war "over there" so we don't have to fight it here at home. However self-serving that explanation, the soldiers are also fighting for military-industrial profits and a failed policy that has killed mostly non-combatant civilians. The so-called good war, this isn't. And in the homeland, we're now subject to a new insecurity, the just passed Military Commission Act, which makes all of us potential unlawful enemy combatants in this continuing war on terror.

In a column Zinn wrote for The Progressive just days after September 11, 2001, he said:

We need new ways of thinking. A \$300 billion dollar military budget has not given us security. Military bases all over the world, our warships on every ocean, have

not given us security. Land mines and a "missile defense shield" will not give us security. We need to rethink our position in the world. We need to stop sending weapons to countries that oppress other people or their own people. We need to decide that we will not go to war, whatever reason is conjured up by the politicians or the media, because war in our time is always indiscriminate, a war against innocents, a war against children. War is terrorism, magnified a hundred times.

He wrote those words before the failed war policy, the death and destruction of so many fellow global citizens, and before a military budget request for FY 2007 of over \$500 billion. We need not wonder why just days before this election the British public declared itself in one poll as more in fear of the American presidents threat to world peace than either North Korea or Iran.

Let's send a positive message of hope, activism, and the spirit of redemption to a world that still fears us a lot more than it admires those American values now being packaged by Washington. Start a global distribution of Professor Zinn's 90-minute talk from Chapman University. You can order a DVD copy for a suggested \$3 donation from www.justicevision.org. Or call (213) 747-6345.

I plan to send a copy to the State Department. I don't expect they'll appoint Zinn to the titular public diplomacy ambassador position. He may not even mind. Lucky for us, we've got him as a people's ambassador, and can continue our own show-and-tell to Washington and the world that voices of America vary and carry.

Nancy Snow shows symptoms of a form of citizen revelry known as chronic Zinn-itis, that makes her unable to sit, much less, stand neutral.
