

A tour d'horizon—a global survey of hotspots—is standard ambassadorial practice. Conducted usually over lunch with a counterpart in some comfortable diplomatic perch, it helps suss out mutual positions and makes for a decent dispatch home. But the tour d'horizon of this former ambassador from this distinctly uncomfortable perch in sizzling Delhi has no silver lining.

The resultant dispatch is short and direct: the world is losing it; we are fundamentally broken, morally bereft, and intellectually devalued. Take, for instance, the Uttar Pradesh government's plans to cut 33,000 fully grown trees and nearly 80,000 other plants in protected forest areas to create a new 111km-long road for the *kanwar yatra*. Unless this is a deeply spiritual method of countering climate change, this proposal—announced even as the heat wave blazed, forest fires crackled and polling officers died untimely deaths—is incomprehensible. Ambient temperatures can be 10 degrees lower on roads with a tree canopy. Someone please say no: the *kanwariyas* will bless you for the shade.

Or take, further afield, Nikki Haley crouching in Israel. She is inscribing a message with a purple pen on US artillery shells: "Finish them," she scrawls, and draws a valentine heart between Israel and the US. Those shells are not going to finish Hamas, as the last eight months of relentless bombardment, estimated even in the first 100 days to be the kilotonnage of three nuclear bombs, has shown. But they will finish many more starving innocent refugees cowering in tents. Where is the empathy that must cover Palestinian innocents as well as Israeli hostages? For one who comes from the land of Gandhi, Haley must know that more pain is not the balm for pain. Valentine hearts are for schoolgirls; think of the child's beating heart, the size of her tiny fist, that the shell will "finish" before it finds, if ever, the terrorist.

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And what does Jared Kushner, Donald Trump's son-in-law and go-to man on the Middle East see in the devastated Gaza strip? "Very valuable," very hot "waterfront property". He advises Israel to "finish (again finish!) the job...move the people out and then clean it up." Clean up two million lives and homes so that a greedy landshark can get to work for "filthy lucre's sake (St James Bible, Titus 1:11)". And he kindly offers to "bulldoze something" in the Negev to dump the Gazans. He knows not that disembodied ghosts will howl through his high-rise paradise of shining steel and glass and bloodied children will dance in that Disneyland. Kushner's crass vision may yet be realised if Trump, the master dealer of real estate, is president again. So far, the people of the US have shown no visceral objection to accepting as their leader a felon, convicted on 34 counts, with his baggage of fraud and deceit, racism and slander, obscenity and greed and putting him at the head of the world's most powerful military force.

In such a world it does not seem strange that while you and I meticulously separate our kitchen waste, North Korea has found a better solution. Hundreds of balloons dropped garbage bags filled with excrement and other rubbish—recyclable, compostable, hazardous—on their neighbours in the south. South Koreans lamented this "clear violation of international law" and advised their citizens to stay indoors; to be fair, they had earlier sent balloons filled with USB sticks with South Korean pop music videos to the North.

No matter which way you run this tour d'horizon of an unhinged world, it plunges downhill. The heartfelt query of the hapless Major Clifton in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* comes to mind: "Are they (both) mad? Or am I going mad? Or is it the sun?"