

Stimulus Ham

Paul R. Potts

26 Dec 2020

Saturday

Stimulus Ham

I've had some dark Christmasses past. One year I drove home to Erie to visit my mother and stepfather. He was suffering from fairly severe dementia and had been attempting to do some rewiring work in the basement. Somehow he managed to blow the main buss fuse to their home, which killed the power, on Christmas Eve. It was not just a matter of flipping a breaker. We had to track down an electrician willing to come out that evening to fix the wiring problem and bring the power back. I've spent Christmasses and New Year's Eves alone on occasion, sometimes in a deep funk. But I haven't lived through a Christmas during which our whole *country* was suffering through dementia in the dark, having a collective nervous breakdown.

There's a *political* breakdown as well. We're seeing the kind of abandonment of working people that would, and has, in many countries, led to populist uprising, general strikes, or, at a minimum, a realignment of some type: the collapse of a political party and/or the surge of a new party. But I don't see that on the horizon, largely because the donor class has no interest in change. The inability of frustrated people to produce meaningful political change doesn't, historically speaking, bode well for the long-term prospects of a country.

Somehow I managed to get through my last two days of work and get a few useful things done, in part due to the assistance of my kind younger co-worker Patrick, who has been my main collaborator on several major projects now.

I skipped the in-person end-of-year meeting and worked from home on Monday, then went into the office on Tuesday. I took the rest of the week off, and the rest of next week off, too, although I might go in anyway to finish a few things, possibly some evening or maybe tomorrow.

I was startled to learn that the company bought everyone a whole Dearborn brand spiral-sliced ham, as well as a restaurant gift card and a tin of popcorn. There was a whole pallet of hams. And one of my co-workers who lives alone told me he just wouldn't be able to get through it without wasting a lot of food, so

he offered me his ham. I traded him my gift card for it, since he was more likely to make use of it — it wouldn't cover even half of a takeout meal for my whole family, but would feed him several meals. So he got future Mexican takeout and we wound up with a second ham. The spare went into the freezer in the garage.

It's tasty ham and I'm happy to have them and we will definitely eat it. But — since starting my current job, every year I've gotten an end-of-year bonus. I haven't heard it confirmed for certain, but I am pretty sure the hams mean that we won't be getting bonuses this year.

The prospect of future direct relief payments to families is more than a little uncertain at the moment. For now at least I am still working, and we've got our stimulus ham. As long as I'm working, we can get by without a stimulus check, for now, although it would certainly be useful. But a lot of folks *can't* get by much longer without help. Extended unemployment benefits expired today, for millions of people, and the pandemic is not over. Paying people through the state unemployment systems is far from perfect — people have been struggling with their overloaded state bureaucracies for months — but it's helped people who succeeded in collecting benefits. With people now starting to receive vaccines, there are reasons to be hopeful, but millions of people are traveling and gathering for Christmas, and so hospitals fear the worst in January.

There was a strange bombing in Nashville. It's far from clear to me why the recreational vehicle stuffed with bombs was parked where it was parked instead of in a busier or more densely populated area. It seems like at least one person may have died. But there was no mass loss of life, because there was a fairly effective evacuation. So I'm grateful for that, at least, although the intent and meaning of the attack remains worryingly unclear.

Christmas 2020

Strangely, shortly after we got our heat properly fixed — which took three visits from an HVAC technician from Hutzel, and cost several times more than we initially were led to expect — our oven stopped working, just in time to stymie our plans for holiday baking. It's not completely broken. The broiler still works, and two of the four stove burners work. We also have a working Instant Pot and an electric counter-top roaster. (The second Instant Pot, which I repaired by replacing the fuse, burned out again, so there's something further wrong with it; I'll replace it at some point). So we have plenty of options for cooking, but it's demoralizing. We might experiment with baking bread in the roaster. It worked to bake biscuits, although they didn't brown up very well; we browned them a bit under the broiler. We might also try making Boston brown bread in a can inside the Instant Pot, since that's a well-established way to make that sort of bread. I'm also advocating for a spicy figgy pudding, served with a hard sauce.

We'll be able to get the oven fixed, at some point, but it's a bad time to try to schedule a visit from an appliance repair technician. We would want to get everyone out of the house and open up windows for ventilation. What do you

do with seven kids on a winter day when you need to get them out of the house for a few hours, and there are no safe public places to take them? Maybe one of us drives them around for a while. But the Suburban is in bad shape. The dashboard lights up like a Christmas tree with warning lights and it is making some worrying noises. So we are trying to use it as little as possible until we can get some repairs done.

I opened up the base of the oven to try to figure out what is wrong with it. Nothing looks clogged or obviously broken in the lower burner; it just won't ignite or even spark. So I suspect it needs a new igniter part. Two of the four stove burner valves are seized up and the knobs will not turn at all. Following some tutorials I found on YouTube, I have done what I can to try to clean out the mechanisms and lubricate them, but it did no good at all; I think the toddlers bent or damaged something.

It might be time for a new oven. This one was not new when we bought the house; the previous owner bought a decent-looking used gas range when he renovated the place. And we have certainly used it hard. Grace and I always wanted a gas range, and we like using it, but the oven has never been very good, and heats very unevenly. So, depending on how much the repairs might cost, we'd consider replacing it. Given what we've been reading recently about indoor air quality and gas appliances, we might consider replacing it with an electric model. But to do that I think we'd need to have some of our house wiring upgraded.

As you can see, any stimulus money we received would pretty much go right back into the local economy, which was always the theory behind Keynesian stimulus.

We did all our food shopping as far in advance as we could manage, so that we could stay locked down and avoid, as much as possible, crowded stores. I ordered several movies from eBay sellers and we've been having a Marvel movie marathon. Package delivery was greatly delayed this year. Many postal workers are either sick or in quarantine. So we are still waiting on *Captain America: Civil War*, and we don't want to watch *Avengers: Infinity War* or *Avengers: Endgame* until we've seen that one.

We did the best we could to make a low-key but festive Christmas, without going anywhere, without guests, and without Mass. It's been challenging. Our delightful toddlers are also demanding as hell. We're not sleeping very well. On Christmas morning the kids were waiting for me, so they could bust into the candy and small gifts we got them. It was all I could do to go face the mess and noise. But I managed.

We've now seen a few more of the Marvel Cinematic Universe movies, so I'll comment briefly on some of those. And that's about all the concentration I've got for today.

Marvel's The Avengers (2012 Film)

After *Captain America: The First Avenger* it was time to watch the first big Avengers blockbuster, a long and complicated film with many stars. The incredible visuals in a film like this are engaging and can often serve to distract the viewer from the distinct lack of a single, emotionally engaging story to follow. There are many complex scenes with long, unbroken camera moves that cover a whole series of conversations or fights. It's impressive, but often feels cold. It's probably more engaging on a big screen, but on the small screen, I can't help but find myself noticing the many moments when characters are computer-generated rather than live. This is often covered up a bit with very skillful editing, but I'll find that I'm muttering to myself "real Thor, fake Thor, fake Thor, fake Iron Man, real Iron Man, real Captain America, fake Captain America," and so on. Meanwhile, the number of buildings apparently demolished is really impressive.

Of the performances, I really admire Mark Ruffalo's work as Bruce Banner, although the giant version of Hulk in these films is entirely animated. Ruffalo's Bruce Banner is an anxious scientist with an anger-management problem; and as he tells Captain America, he's always angry. How does that phrase go? "If you aren't outraged, you're not paying attention?"

I also enjoy particularly enjoy Tom Hiddleston as Loki, Chris Hemsworth as Thor, and Scarlett Johansson as Black Widow. There is a great scene early on where we see one of Joss Whedon's trademark portrayal of an ass-kicking female character on full display, as Natasha (Black Widow) appears to be in peril, but quickly reveals that she is in full control of the situation and was only allowing herself to be tied up and interrogated in order to collect information from her captors. The fight choreography in this sequence is really terrific.

Despite great scenes like this, unfortunately the whole film, all two hours and twenty-three minutes of it, feels like a long and slightly disjointed series of those scenes, rather than a coherent film. Sometimes the scenes are hilarious, and sometimes dizzying and impressive, but it's just hard to feel emotionally engaged with this many characters at once. And a lot of the plot points just involve clipping plot coupons. Just as in the Harry Potter books, Rowling's story involves collecting a whole series of Voldemort's horcruxes to set up the final battle, in this series, the story involves collecting a whole series of "Infinity Stones," each with has its own characteristics. All these Infinity Stones have to be placed onto the chessboard to set up the endgame. In this film, it's the Space Stone, housed in the Tesseract, which also drives some of the plot of *Captain America: The First Avenger*.

There's also a little problem: it's hard to believe that any of our favorite characters are ever really in peril, which makes the dramatic fight scenes less interesting. There's never any question that Hulk is going to be killed, no matter how crazily violent things get, so the only remaining thing to be interested in is just how the fight plays out. Honestly this is something I don't like about the way Hulk is portrayed in these films. Loki and Thor are gods, so it makes

sense that they are nearly impossible to kill. But Hulk is supposed to be made of flesh and blood, and so it doesn't make much sense to me that they can drop a building on him, or drop him from thousands of feet in the air, and he can walk away with only a slight headache.

Because *Captain America: Winter Soldier* hadn't arrived yet, we watched *Guardians of the Galaxy* instead the next night, so:

***Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014 Film)**

I took a few of the kids to see this in theaters when it came out. It's a big fun movie that doesn't take itself too seriously, and introduces several characters that will fight with the Avengers in the "phase three" films. But unfortunately this one suffers a lot from being shrunk down to a small screen. There's just so much going on in the frames that it's hard to stay engaged with it in the smaller format. So I still recommend this one, although see it on a big screen if you can. The plot involves setting up the cosmic villain Thanos and another Infinity Stone, the Power Stone, but you don't really need to have seen any of the other Marvel Cinematic Universe films to enjoy this one.

***Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014 Film)**

Winter Soldier fortunately arrived on Christmas Eve, after the package had sat in limbo with tracking information not updated for over a week, so we got to watch it on Christmas Eve.

I had been waiting for this one with some interest, because as I mentioned last time, *Captain America: The First Avenger* was a lot more enjoyable than I expected. This one wasn't bad either. Although it involves a large cast of characters like *Marvel's The Avengers*, there's more of an emotional through-line to follow: it's about a conspiracy to undermine S.H.I.E.L.D. from within, and a mysterious assassin called the Winter Soldier. It functions more as a spy thriller in parts than a superhero movie, and that's fun. The scenes with the Winter Soldier are quite thrilling and even a bit scary. So I also recommend this one.

Nick Fury, director of S.H.I.E.L.D., played by Samuel Jackson, gets quite a bit of screen time in this one, and he is always fun to watch. He has a great chase sequence. In his previous appearances, we've seen him as more of an administrator, so it is great to see Jackson in some of the intense action sequences he does so well, and let loose his charismatic but uniquely and enjoyably intimidating screen persona.

After *Winter Soldier* I wanted to watch something a little more light-hearted before watching the second Avengers blockbuster. So we watched my favorite Thor movie, even though in the in-universe chronology, it comes *after* the Ultron film, rather than before.

***Thor: Raganarok* (2017 Film)**

I think I have written about this one before, so I'll be brief. This is a really fun, and funny, film and I'm happy to see it yet again. Having seen a few more of the Marvel movies leading up to it, some of the references to events in those movies make more sense now. But I never felt that I *had* to watch the others in order to enjoy this one, which is nice because the previous Thor films just aren't very good. There's no Infinity Stone in this one, and the film doesn't hold me hostage to the previous films, while I am starting to feel that "holding me hostage until I've seen all of them" is *exactly* what the series of Avengers blockbusters are designed to do, with Captain America as the hostage-taker.

***The Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015 Film)**

This second Avengers film directed by Joss Whedon is another big, long blockbuster, again well over two hours long, and this one has even more characters than *Marvel's Avengers*. As you might imagine it's thus even more complicated and confusing. It introduces two more people who were given enhanced abilities via Hydra's experimentation: a young man with superhuman speed, and a young woman with telepathic and telekinetic powers.

The main plot involves Tony Stark's wish to create an artificially-intelligent defense system he calls "Ultron," to serve as a sort of contemporary Strategic Defense Initiative, against the advice of Captain America. He finds that the Mind Stone, one of the Infinity Stones, recovered from Loki's scepter, is sentient, and he builds a robot body to house it. So again, one of the Infinity Stones features prominently, both as a story element in its own right, and as something that has to be set up for the endgame.

It turns out that Ultron... well, I'm sorry to have to put it this way, but it has a mind of its own. And it isn't very interested in defending Earth from enemies domestic *or* foreign.

Ultron is played by James Spader, and his voice work (and motion capture work) is fun to watch. We see quite a bit of Banner (and Hulk) in this film, as well as Black Widow, and their scenes together are intriguing. But many scenes in this film are clearly just setting things up for future films, and as such they are a little tedious to sit through. But not all of them — some of that setup involves creating the android Vision, who is a more interesting character than Ultron.

There is at least one, and perhaps as many as three, smaller, leaner movies inside this movie, trying to get out. It's required viewing if you want to follow what is happening in the later films, but I really wish it had been more fun to watch.

The Day After

Last night Grace and I were burned out on trying to cook for the kids so we didn't eat much; I made some pancakes for the kids, late, and then we went

to bed. We didn't even open the last bottle from the Advent wine calendar, a sparkling wine. We might do that tonight, though, since tonight Grace is cooking up a festive meal: ham and kale with rice. Joshua made a large batch of *toum* (Lebanese garlic sauce), so I'm going to reek of garlic for the next few days, and that's just fine with me. I'm not going anywhere, except maybe into an empty office for a while.

I hope that you, dear reader, have been able to get at least a little bit of enjoyment out of Christmas in this dark, strange year. Whether its through movies, or through music, or through books, or through cooking, or eating, or connecting with people in whatever ways you safely can.

Our garden remains the gift that keeps on giving. On Christmas Eve, I harvested four more big, fat leeks. The outer leaves were a bit shriveled, but inside the leeks were in perfect shape even though the temperature has gone well below freezing many times. There are at least ten more leeks in a separate garden bed, but I may wind up leaving those to see whether they start growing again in the early spring. Leeks are amazing, and I am hoping to grow them again.

I had more to say, but the kids are swarming all around me, bickering, fighting, singing, and screaming, and I'm unable to hold any more thoughts long enough to write them down, so I'm going to finish this one up, and send it out.

Stay safe and sane! The shortest day is past; the light is returning. A different kind of darkness remains. But this season, too, will end, and another will begin.

About This Newsletter

This newsletter by Paul R. Potts is available for your use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. If you'd like to help feed my coffee habit, you can leave me a tip via PayPal. Thanks!