

# arts & letters

## MOVIES

### Raggedy Man Chariots of Fire Cutter's Way

Reviewed by John Hospers

• The best films of the current season have been those dealing with some unambitious theme, some small segment of life, which, through compassionate and imaginative handling, is made to reverberate with larger implications than those specifically treated in the film itself. The latest example is **RAGGEDY MAN**. The background is World War II—which though it is never seen is never forgotten—from employees “frozen” in their jobs to the clothing and mores and music (“Rum and Coca Cola”) of the period. It’s a small, dull Texas town, and Sissy Spacek plays a divorced wife with two small children eking out a living as the lone operator of the town’s telephone switchboard. Local rednecks try to prey upon her loneliness, but she repulses their advances; then by accident comes a sailor (Eric Roberts) on a three-day leave, whose life briefly joins hers and makes her come alive again. Other plot elements are interwoven as well, with several startling developments when one least expects them—such as the one (which will not be revealed here) giving significance to the title of the film.

What makes this film eminently worth seeing is a happy mix of elements: finely drawn characterizations, a clear and engrossing story line, and an unerring sense of the time and place, as exhibited in small, telling details, which the usual run of film makers would not have thought to include and which evoke in the viewer a strong upbeat feeling even after leaving the theater. Through it all we learn not only what it was like to be a civilian in the boondocks in 1944, but what it is like anywhere, anytime to be a single parent with children, to be lonely, to be fearful, and to be in love.

• In his exhortation to “Young Men of a New Age” (preface to *Milton*), William Blake wrote, in one stanza, “Bring me my chariot of fire.” Much later Blake’s poem was set to music, and the song has become famous in Britain; so the significance of the title, never mentioned in the



Sissy Spacek in *Raggedy Man*

film, would not be lost on Englishmen but on almost everyone else.

English or not, however, almost anyone can expect a very enjoyable experience from seeing **CHARIOTS OF FIRE**. Yet an outline of the subject would hardly inspire most people to see it: a historical record of the Paris Olympic Games of 1924, with two British track champions, Harry Abrahams and Eric Liddell, as the chief protagonists. Abrahams, the son of Lithuanian Jewish parents, but English to the core, races in order to succeed in the face of a residual anti-Semitism present in English society; Liddell, the son of a Scottish missionary to China, races in order to serve God. (In real life, he returned to China as a missionary shortly after the races and was killed by the Chinese communists in 1949.) The background of each of them is developed in revealing touches, and we get to know them both well before their paths cross halfway through the film.

In some works of art the parts are greater than the whole, the parts not meshing together or being subordinated to the whole design; in this one, however, the whole is greater than the parts. Each part, by itself modest and unambitious, contributes unflinchingly to the whole effect and with never a hitch: “everything works.” The atmosphere of post-World War I is recreated in deft touches, such as the sight of battle-scarred faces and a lingering contempt for those who did not serve. The script is excellent throughout, incisive without being arty or self-conscious: Abrahams’s retort to the Cambridge headmasters when they accuse him of lacking team spirit is one of the picture’s many literary gems. The

characterizations too are faultless: there is Ben Cross as Abrahams—troubled, sensitive, articulate, determined, courageous; Ian Charleston as Liddell—devoutly religious, but never hypocritical or ostentatious, serene in his faith and the confidence it gives him, entering a race as a thank-offering to God; and Ian Holm as Abrahams’s trainer—in what other film could the simple act of pushing his hand through a straw hat in celebration of victory draw applause from an audience? At last Britain has again produced a film that lingers in the memory, and is worthy of a wide international audience.

• Completed some months ago under the title of the book, *Cutter and Bone*, the film found no ready release and has now appeared in various art theaters under the title **CUTTER’S WAY**. Touted as the most-imaginative and best-directed film of the year, it nevertheless requires considerable staying power to enjoy it throughout. From afar off, as it were, one can appreciate some brilliance of dialogue and an occasional stab at the jugular in characterization. But the characters—well enough acted by Jeff Bridges, Lisa Eichhorn, and John Heard—still emerge primarily as sociological case histories.

There is a murder-mystery plot that is so tenuous that for whole stretches of the film nothing whatever develops in it and it almost becomes forgotten. The main plot has to do with interactions of the characters, who are not all that easy to empathize with: if one is imbued with the work-ethic, one quickly concludes that they are all consumers rather than producers and are always feeling sorry for themselves because they can’t consume more. Perhaps the fact that one of them is a wounded war veteran is supposed to provide a justification for their lifestyles—at any rate, many people in the audience appear to side enthusiastically with them: when the veteran plows his uninsured car into a neighbor’s, demolishing it, and leaves the neighbor to pay the bill, cheers arise from the audience. But then, much of the audience appears to consist also of nonproducing consumers grasping at any suggested justification for their way of life.

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## BOOKS

## Taxing Questions

**How to Limit Government Spending.**

By Aaron Wildavsky.

Berkeley: University of California Press.

1980. 197 pp. \$8.95.

**The Power to Tax.**

By Geoffrey Brennan and

James M. Buchanan.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

1980. 231 pp. \$22.50.

Reviewed by David Friedman

Both of these books are about constitutional limitations on government, and both are in favor of the idea. That's all they have in common, however.

Wildavsky is, to judge by his book, passionately devoted to the middle of the road; his book is, perhaps as a result, consistently superficial. One example is his explanation of the failure of the ambitious social legislation of the '60s. The problems government undertook to solve were simply too difficult. "No matter how much money is spent, reading, health, and recidivism rates do not improve, because there is no known way of doing these things." It does not occur to him to ask whether government, being unable to teach, cure, or reform, ought perhaps to get out of the schooling, health, and rehabilitation businesses. That might force him to question the belief implicit throughout the book that the optimal level of government spending must be within 10 percent of the present level of government spending.

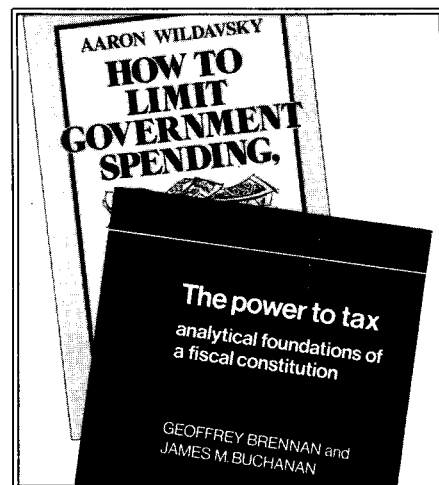
Another example is his attempt to explain the growth of government by political developments of the early '60s—primarily the abandonment of the goal of a balanced budget. He somehow neglects to mention that by 1960 the federal government was already spending 18½ percent of GNP, up from 2½ percent in 1890; it is currently spending about 22½ percent. Causes usually precede their effects.

*How to Limit Government Spending* is irritatingly superficial, rarely pursuing any argument beyond a few sentences, but it is by no means useless. Its discussion of a wide range of arguments for and against current proposals to limit government expenditure will be useful to anyone involved in that controversy; if it had

treated them in much greater depth, it would have been a much longer book.

While Buchanan and Brennan make a few bows to the "tax revolt" in their preface, *The Power to Tax* has little direct connection with current political controversy; it is a product of an approach to public finance that has occupied one of the authors since long before Proposition 13 was thought of. To understand what that approach is and why it is both radical and important, one must first understand the orthodoxy it opposes.

The traditional literature in public finance seeks to determine how government can extort a given quantity of resources at the least cost to the society. Stated in this way, it may seem a harmless and even useful exercise. But buried in that approach is the assumption



that the government is a rational and benevolent agency, which, having decided how much it ought to spend, requires scholarly advice on how to do as little damage as possible in the process. Government is treated as a benevolent despot—an agency that merely needs to be told how best to do good. This approach to the economics of government is unfortunately not unique to public finance.

To Buchanan and Brennan, on the other hand, government is an agency with its own objectives, and generalized benevolence is not likely to be one of the more important ones. The scientific question of interest is not "What can government, given the power, do that is good?" but rather, "Given certain powers, how will government choose to use them and what will be the consequences?" In the case of public finance this becomes the question, "How will the range of taxes the government can impose affect both the amount the govern-

ment chooses to collect and the cost to the rest of us inflicted by the process of collection?"

In answering that question, Buchanan and Brennan adopt the working hypothesis that, while government may be limited by constitutional restrictions (such as limitations on what taxes it can collect), it is not otherwise limited by the political process. They further assume that government's own objective is to maximize its revenue. They then proceed to analyze the behavior of a government that, given the ability to impose certain sorts of taxes, will always choose those tax rates that yield the maximum revenue. The result is to reverse many of the traditional policy recommendations.

Orthodox public finance favors taxes that are simple to collect and have low "excess burden"—taxes that do as little damage as possible beyond the inevitable damage of making someone poorer by the amount of the tax. Excess burden is associated with the ability of the taxpayer to avoid the tax (at some cost); an income tax imposes excess burden because it induces taxpayers to shift time from working for income to leisure or home production—even when working for income is more productive than the alternatives. But to Buchanan and Brennan the ability of taxpayers to avoid a tax is often desirable even if the avoidance is costly: the more readily taxpayers can avoid the tax, the lower the level of tax at which the government discovers that increased rates lead to decreased revenue. Since a revenue-maximizing government will generally want to collect and spend more than the populace wants it to collect and spend (Buchanan and Brennan assume that at least some of the money goes to provide services the taxpayers want—otherwise the ideal constitution would permit no taxes at all), this is an advantage. Hence Buchanan and Brennan prefer, as a rule, just those sorts of taxes the traditional literature opposes.

Orthodox public-finance economists are, in effect, philosophers advising a prince. While they might suggest that he limit his expenditure, they would never advise him to choose taxes designed to limit the revenue he can collect: if he were willing to limit his expenditure he would not need to be forced; if not, he would not take the advice. Buchanan and Brennan are advising potential victims—citizens setting up a government, which, once established, will be out of their hands.

*The Power to Tax* is a good book for anyone who wishes to understand what