

Tucker's battle for free enterprise



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In the beginnings of American commercial culture, individualism and innovation were seen as the cruxes of the American dream. However, societal pressures and institutional barriers exist today to prevent any such growth foreign to the already established powerhouses. Such barriers to innovation become not only detrimental to the individual American dream, but also to the growth of American innovation. In Francis Ford Coppola's film, *Tucker: The Man and His Dream*, Preston Tucker dreams of a more affordable and safer vehicle that, he believes, could revolutionize the American automobile industry. However, Tucker's innovative ideas are thwarted by certain institutional obstructions, including the Big Three automobile corporations, the United States government, and the press, all of which challenge the Tucker Motor Company. As these powerful forces attempt to break the upstart and his aspirations, Preston Tucker rises up to meet these institutional and social barriers, striving to produce his dream car, the "Tucker Torpedo." One of the institutional obstacles that Preston Tucker faces is the layout and hierarchy of the modern corporation. Within a corporation, the chairman of the board of directors — in this case, Mr. Bennington — holds the most power. Abe Karatz, the Wall Street financier of the Tucker Motor Corporation, realizes that creating an automobile company to rival the Big Three corporations would be impossible without a man from Detroit with previous experience because of the inability to sell enough capital through stock. As Abe Karatz signs the contract that makes Bennington the chairman of the company, he states to Tucker, "We've got to do it, Tucker... We need someone from Detroit with experience or we won't sell any stock." Tucker, fully comprehending that Bennington would not approve of the rear engine and the fuel injection, proceeds to operate in his private barn outside of

Bennington's influence in the corporation. Tucker's decision to deliberately ignore the board members and operate alone with his crew instigates Bennington; slowly, powerful forces begin to move to break Tucker's determination in building his dream car, the "car of tomorrow." Rather than submitting to the institutional hierarchy of the corporation, Tucker ignores orders and continues to build the car that he had promised to the public. Tucker's unwavering personality and refusal to submit might not have been the best option. To ignore a senior's orders in this manner could have potentially resulted in him being fired from his own company. Regardless, Tucker, with his laser-like focus and determination to build his car, eventually realizes that focusing on his own goal will eventually prove his innocence from the accounting fraud organized by the "Iron Triangle." Consequently, he continues to build the car and overcomes the barriers to producing the fifty cars that he promised to the public. The "Iron Triangle" of the War Surplus Committee, the Big Three corporations, and the press becomes another institutional constraint to the Tucker automobile. Bennington, who was put into power as chairman by Abe Karatz to sell stock, orders features of the Tucker such as seatbelts to be taken out because they imply that the "car was unsafe." When Tucker decides to ignore this order, Bennington and the board of directors, along with the Securities and Exchange Commission, proceeds to frame Preston Tucker for scamming the public out of 26 million dollars. Once again, rather than dealing with the complicated issues regarding the court system and the law, the naïve yet brilliant Preston Tucker only focuses upon building the car he promised. His approach to this accounting setup was to, once again, focus solely upon his dreams of manufacturing a revolutionary automobile with futuristic features.

Though he faces hostility from all sides, Tucker remains steady and withstands all of the demeaning comments from the press. This brash, ignorant approach once again might not have been the best option because of the potential hazards and the powerful forces that were fighting against him. Standing in stark contrast to Tucker is his longtime New York financier, Abe Karatz, who succumbs to the pressures of institutions and society. Perhaps because of his previous bank scandal, Karatz cannot stand up to the pressures; he resigns by stating, " Captains go down with their ships, not businessmen." His automatic bailing of Tucker's figurative " ship" shows that the forces that are moving against Tucker are extremely powerful and that Tucker really does not have a chance. However, Tucker insists on not only putting his current Tucker vehicle at risk, but also putting his principle of the " American horse sense" at risk for the sole sake of saving his idea and principle. As a result, Tucker's steadfast principles and concrete desire to build the cars he promised to the public lead him to win the court case that proves his innocence as well as his principle about the possibility of individual American innovation. Needless to say, ultimately, his quest was indeed worth pursuing. Had the Tucker Corporation survived, the Big Three automakers would have probably adopted many of the Tucker Torpedo's new technological and safety features decades earlier than they did. Tucker instinctively knows that his introduction of seatbelts implies to the buying public that cars without them are unsafe. He emphasizes this selling point at a lunch with the War Assets Administration, where he shows slides of accidents and people who were injured. Tucker's intrinsic understanding of what " sells" the American public is his most valuable asset, and it's also what makes the Big Three so afraid of him. If they are to survive this "

Torpedo," they have to either produce quality products efficiently while keeping prices down or resort to unethical activities that will snuff out their competition. Unfortunately, their choice says a lot about their capabilities. All in all, Tucker's story is that of a man who might have revolutionized the automobile industry had the established Big Three corporations lived up to the challenge. Instead, Tucker becomes a victim of their fear and self-interest. In a system whose rules can be summed up in a single phrase — let the better man win — it seems a harsh injustice that the better man did not. There are many things about Preston Tucker that are contagious, but the "catchiest" is his "sky's-the-limit" attitude. He is a true dreamer, a man with extreme vision. But more than that, he is a man who can make a stranger believe. Karatz caught the bug and so did a huge percentage of the American public. Tucker also has the stamina and follow-through to turn his dream into something real — in fact, something extraordinary. It seems a crime that something this good might possibly fail, especially as a result of the plots of others who have been the beneficiaries of this same free enterprise system. True free enterprise is very similar to natural selection: only the fittest survive. Businesses that efficiently produce quality products for the most affordable cost will endure. Under this system, everyone gets a fair chance: equal opportunity for all also means an equal chance to succeed or fail. It is when this freedom is intentionally violated that the system breaks down and injustice is done. Tucker is an unfortunate victim of this breakdown. In Tucker's own words, "I grew up a generation too late I guess because now the way the system works, the loner, the dreamer, the crackpot who comes up with some crazy idea that [...] later turns out to revolutionize the world, he's squashed from above before he even gets his head out of the

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water because the bureaucrats, they'd rather kill a new idea than let it rock the boat." Tucker has a blind faith in this system, where an entrepreneur has the right to challenge even the largest industry giants and where a man with an idea can freely pursue greatness based on the simple premises of intelligent planning and hard work. Tucker revels in the honor of living in a country so great that this opportunity is available to all. For a man like him, just having the opportunity is an open door for success. In a society where giant corporations — corporations such as Exxon Mobil, General Motors, General Electric, and Goldman Sachs — significantly influence many government policies, Preston Tucker reminds us about what we have accomplished through the unrestrained individual innovation of the human mind and the potential we possess. Tucker, in the climactic closing statement of his trial, states, " When I was a boy, I used to read all about Edison and the Wright brothers and Mr. Ford. They were my heroes." As Tucker points out, the idealism of Tucker reflects upon many different individuals throughout history who had an innovative idea or invention and laid the foundation to some of the most successful companies in operation today. Naturally, individuals today and past have followed the spirit of Preston Tucker in being able to create their own inventions without regard for any forces that worked against them. These individuals, along with Tucker, should be admired for their unfaltering refusal to give into forces that try to limit the innovative minds of the collective human endeavor. Nothing can stymie Tucker's idealism and his faith in the system he has been so proud of his entire life. Although Tucker walked a very dangerous slope in attempting to build the Torpedo, all of the powerful forces and institutions were ultimately not strong enough to come between the man and his dream.

In Ayn Rand's famous novel *Atlas Shrugged*, Dagny Taggart says, "The sight of an achievement is the greatest gift a human being can offer to others."

Tucker echoes this same sentiment. To him, it doesn't matter what he lost while playing the game because his achievement is the ultimate victory: he faced all obstacles and still built the car. At the end of his court hearing, he literally has nothing left but his freedom. But his freedom is all he needs: on his way home, he begins to outline a new idea to improve refrigeration.

Tucker's resilience is a silent shot at those who call him a failure, and his reprisal is his unfaltering faith in the belief that "it's the idea that counts, and the dream."