

# *Capitalism and Morality*

---

## **TUCKER: DON'T LET THE FUTURE PASS YOU BY**

**Heidi Kemp**

**Heidi was a student in the MBA Business Through Literature course in Spring of 2007.**

One aspect that lures most individuals to America is 'the American Dream'. Preston Tucker, in *Tucker: The Man and His Dream*, epitomizes the true everyday person who has big dreams and does everything they can to achieve them. Even when the dream doesn't work out, Tucker inspires the American public.

Preston Tucker is first seen in a mock-promotional film that sets the tone of salesmanship for what will follow. He is then introduced as a family man in Ypsilanti, Michigan, the kind of guy who can come home with twelve new Dalmatians for no particular reason, then invite everyone in the neighborhood to dinner.

Tucker has a long history of giant ideas. During WWII, Tucker anticipated the need for an armored vehicle for the military. His idea was so good that the military actually turned it down because it was too advanced. They did embrace his idea of the Tucker design that was a shield for the soldiers shooting from within the armored vehicle. It is hard to believe the military would turn down a design that was too fast or too advanced. It would seem that they would want to use anything that would ensure the defeat of the enemy. But just like with anything dealing with the government, it is a paradoxical situation.

Not to be dissuaded, Tucker unveils his dream of building the Tucker Torpedo. An amazingly beautiful car unlike any car in existence, it would have the motor in the rear, seatbelts, windshields that popped out for safety, and a third headlight that moved in whatever direction the steering wheel was headed. The design and concept was truly revolutionary. His optimism was infectious and soon his family and friends 'caught his dream'.

Financing was the next big issue. Again, Tucker never wavered in his belief that this car would be built. It was all about convincing the right person to finance the project. Enter Abe Karatz. Abe is immediately skeptical given the radical design and the improbability of slipping the design past the Big 3 in Detroit (Ford, GM, and Chrysler). Through his optimism and charisma, Tucker is able to pass his dream on to Abe.

The first thing Abe tells Tucker they need to do is publicize the idea and see what kind of demand there would be. This version of market surveying is necessary when trying to introduce a completely new product to the market. If there is no demand, then there is no use spending time and money on the project. Tucker runs an article in 'Pic' magazine that featured the Torpedo with the slogan, "Don't let the future pass you by". The family received over 150,000 letters in response. People loved the sleek futuristic design of the Tucker.

Abe's next suggestion was to get someone powerful and popular to manage the company. This would give them credibility and hopefully encourage people to buy a Tucker automobile. They chose Benington, a classic high-ranking, almost cartoon-like villain to manage the company. One of Tucker's biggest mistakes was that he didn't read the contract with Benington. Thus, he was unaware that he was no longer in control of the company that he started.

Alex, an automotive engineer, becomes a member of the Tucker team shortly thereafter. Tucker's dream was infectious and Alex was soon drafting the car in a way that was absolutely beautiful. While the other workers and Alex worked diligently to turn the drawing into a reality, Tucker and Abe attempted to secure a post-war factory in Chicago. Tucker ingeniously shows his ability to play the corporate game at this point. He was selling the idea of the Tucker being a safe vehicle. To prove his point, he showed very gruesome pictures of automobile injuries and fatalities while serving very rare roast beef. The members couldn't think of anything but keeping their lunches down, and Tucker was given permission to purchase the factory.

Tucker is given sixty days to develop a prototype of the Tucker. While his employees work on the car, he begins to advertise outside of the New York Stock Exchange to gain popularity and to establish the name. The problem is that he is promising a car that doesn't exist and the \$15 million needed to make the prototype is nonexistent as well. Tucker shows his ability of being a superb salesman, but they are all empty promises. He truly believes in his product though, and lies so that others will get on board. Tucker thinks that if they even give his car a chance, he'll be able to convince them.

This is just the beginning of problems for the Tucker. The three big car companies in Detroit want to squash Tucker. They utilize their connections with a powerful senator from Detroit. The Senator explicitly instructs Tucker to stay out of the car business. Not to be dissuaded, Tucker is determined to take on the world, meaning the big three. The Senator and the big three then fix it so Tucker can't purchase steel from anyone.

The unveiling of the first Tucker was right around the corner. After a very short lapse of despair, Tucker rallies the troops and they make due with parts from a junkyard. At the unveiling, Tucker must once again use his charisma and charm to stall the public as his employees use every last second to prepare the car. The car fails to start anything but a fire on its way up the ramp. A disaster was diverted, but one of the security guards was actually a spy and leaked all of the information to the big three.

The Board of the company does not trust Tucker. They feel he is a huge liability. The answer to their problem was to send him on a publicity tour to get him out of their hair for a while. It is after this that Tucker finds out he is not the owner of the company anymore. It is hard to sympathize with Tucker when he was the one who never read the contract. He was naïve with almost foolish optimism.

Tucker is approached by Howard Hughes. The man is paranoid but gives Tucker valuable information concerning the purchasing of steel from a helicopter company. This puts Tucker back in the running and they start producing more and more Tuckers. The big three followed him and had him under constant supervision. Abe bails out on him as soon as he knows the SEC is questioning some of their practices. Apparently he did jail time at some point and felt his presence would have a negative impact on the Tucker organization. Tucker tries to convince him to stay, but Abe responds by saying, "captains go down with the ship, not businessmen".

The SEC confiscates all of the files and Tucker is tried by a jury. It's the classic David versus Goliath story. Only in this story, David doesn't necessarily win. Tucker does get to prove himself and the car worthy by parading the jurors around in the fifty cars brought to the courthouse. But he is still unable to

resume production of the Tucker. In this way, he lost. The big three's power and greed was too much for one small man with a big dream.

But in the whole scheme of things, Tucker manages to inspire his employees, his financiers, and the world. He knew the uphill battle that was ahead of him but he believed so powerfully about his dream that he had to try. While his optimism was commendable, his naiveté actually hurt him in a business aspect.

For instance, when Benington comes on board, Tucker has a bad feeling about it. But he fails to read the contract. Thus, he lost control of the company. This oversight was a huge mistake for Tucker. While it may not have solved all of his problems, it definitely could have eliminated a few. Furthermore, in his zest to make everyone believe in the Tucker, he makes many false promises. Sometimes he was able to pull it out and keep from being found out, but sooner or later, lies catch up to a person. And when they do, most trust and reputation is lost for the businessman.

Tucker did maintain his charisma, charm, and optimism throughout the entire situation. He never lost hope that his dream would be fulfilled. This quality is what drives people to achieve the impossible. During the hearing, Tucker asks the jurors to ponder what the world would be like if Benjamin Franklin had not been allowed to fly a kite. He felt that the big three were acting in the same way to squash his dream of producing Tuckers. Furthermore, he didn't let their greed and threats stop him. Even while he was in jail, his workers, based on their trust in Tucker, continued to make the cars.

The characters in this novel were not overly dimensional. For instance, the villains, including the big three and the powerful senator, appear almost cartoonish. Even Belington and the Board don't appear real. They have no real depth and emerge superficial. The reader is never allowed into their thought processes to determine what is driving their decisions. These forces against Tucker tend to be exaggerated and stereotyped.

Moreover, Tucker even comes across as one-dimensional. The reader never gets to experience the real man behind the genius. They never get to really see what makes Tucker tick. He's all bluff and charm and sideshow pep talks. There is no real complexity to his character and no real motivation. Thus, the reader never really gets to know Tucker. He lacks any common sense or any notion of the real odds against him. His wife doesn't show any depth either. She's willing to accept anything and everything he says. Part of that is from his charisma, but even when he brought twelve Dalmatians home for no reason, she didn't utter one word of defiance. The reader fails to understand her and how she deals with her husband's far-fetched dreams and how she is able to do it all so graciously.

The scene where Tucker is scheduled to unveil his new masterpiece of a car to the assembled American automobile press is the most crucial. Yet, no insight as to what's really going on with the car is given. The focus is on Tucker's uncanny ability to charm the audience into waiting and making them believe what was coming out from behind that curtain was the most revolutionary idea of the times. In this scene, the reader wants to be sympathetic toward Tucker, given he was being spied on and the car was a complete disaster, but the main feeling is annoyance. This annoyance stems from Tucker using every venue possible to thwart the audience. He appears deceitful and sneaky. The reader knows what is going on behind the curtain and the feeling of disgust is overwhelming since Tucker is lying to the public.

In conclusion, this movie and screenplay was overall an amazing testament to the main character, Preston Tucker, and the fact that he was actually able to build fifty Tuckers before he was stopped by the big three car manufacturers in Detroit. Tucker had more optimism and charisma than most of the other characters combined. He had a dream and never once considered that he wouldn't be able to achieve it. His dream was infectious and everyone around him was affected. Tucker represents the true American dream that even the little guys can do big things. But in the end, a bad feeling of big business exhumes.

Parts of Tucker's business style helped him and he seemed to surround himself with the right kind of support people. But, he also made some mistakes concerning the contract with Benington and the lies he told to sell the car. The characters lacked depth though, and the reader was never really able to delve into the person Tucker really was. Props go out to the real Preston Tucker and what he was able to achieve in his David versus Goliath battle, even if he did lose in the end.