

## TUCKER (1988) \_\_\_\_\_ 9.5/10

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*We need to resurrect the man and his dream to help restore the republic*

*Written by Arnold Schulman*

*Written by David Seidler*

*Directed by Francis Ford Coppola*

Jeff Bridges ... Preston Tucker

Joan Allen ... Vera

Martin Landau ... Abe

Frederic Forrest ... Eddie

Mako ... Jimmy

Elias Koteas ... Alex

Christian Slater ... Junior

Nina Siemaszko ... Marilyn Lee

Dean Stockwell ... Howard Hughes

Lloyd Bridges ... Senator Homer Ferguson

*Preston Tucker: Isn't that the idea? To build a better mouse trap?*

*Abe: Not if you're a mouse!*

This movie I kick myself for having missed when it came out 20 years ago, and it was only last week on HBO that I actually got the Tucker experience with both barrels. The two main ideas for me of this all-American Horatio Alger "rags-to-riches" story are:

- ❑ Innovation in conflict with the stale old dead way of doing things (out of collective ignorance and blind obedience to authority)—call it the Pleasantville barrier—and
- ❑ Man against the state, particularly the US state and its insidious methods of coercion working in harmony with cartel business interests—call it the Kleptocon barrier.

Without question, the ebullient, imaginative, brilliant, individualistic, hard working Preston Thomas Tucker is more deserving of the quintessential "American Hero" designation than anyone Ayn Rand ever imagined—from the iconoclastic/artistic (humorless) Howard Roark to the ethereal/scientific (humorless) John Galt. Or anyone else ever imagined for that matter. Preston Tucker had it all: a joie de vivre that made everyone around him want to sing for joy, a similarly eccentric loving family with hearts as big as Texas, the imagination of a precocious child, and the hard driving intelligence of a man who wills himself to be the best.

Jeff Bridges is the perfect actor to bring Tucker to screen life, and Joan Allen the perfect accompaniment as his sparky wife Vera. It's interesting, too, that this film is probably Christian Slater's first big break into the world of big cinema, as Tucker's son. The other exceptional performance is delivered by Martin Landau, who was nominated for an Oscar as best supporting actor and won the Golden Globe (and Chicago Film Critics) award in that category. He plays Abe Karatz, the earliest investor in Tucker's venture... a single man who as time goes on becomes best friend and confidant to Tucker and his whole family.

I consider Tucker to be the ultimate family flick.

The movie is efficient and thought-provoking, not to mention emotion provoking (toward the end, gut-wrenching). Tucker grows up in the 19-teens in Lincoln Park, Michigan, a close-in suburb of Detroit; he becomes fascinated with anything automotive, quits school at 13 to become an office boy for Cadillac. Tucker subsequently worked at a number of other Detroit automobile companies, furthering his career as a mechanic and test driver, then moving into sales after attending Detroit's Cass Technical High School.

He remained in the automotive business—and created a fast mobile armored vehicle (which wasn't used because the military regarded it as too fast) and a bullet-proof gun turret (which was manufactured and used extensively by military craft) through the WW II era—when between 1942 and 1946 no civilian cars were manufactured. Based on his combination mail-order/first-hand knowledge of engineering, he designed the ultimate automobile, the Tucker Torpedo, which wound up with the following futuristic features:

- disk brakes
- rear engine, capable of 130 mph
- fuel injection
- seat belts
- roll bar
- shatter-proof glass, popout windshield
- steel ribbon protection for front impact
- safety chamber
- padded dash
- center headlamp moving with steering
- independent wheel suspension
- seating for four across

These features were technically feasible at the time, and most of them would have gone into full production with the Tucker automobile in 1948. But the car was so revolutionary that the Big 3 stood to lose \$billions in sales if anything like the Tucker were to reach mass distribution. With Tucker's savvy for marketing in the new era (where you could get national exposure of a color-printed ad in a magazine) and with Abe Karatz' help, interest was strong, and stock orders came shortly after.

"He had to be stopped," and the second half of the story is how the US automotive cartel in combination with powerful figures in government, chiefly Michigan Senator Homer Ferguson (Lloyd Bridges) crushed "the car of the future." And how they nearly threw the innovator into a jail cell through a concerted campaign to literally criminalize Tucker's attempts to get his dream car<sup>[1]</sup> into production, which campaign—furthered in the mind-control media by no less a muckraker than the most self-elevated asshole of history, Drew Pearson—is one of the most vicious assaults on a creative mind since the Inquisition.

Incredibly, the SEC prosecuted Preston Tucker for fraud, which according to the movie would have carried a maximum jail term of 155 years. Right there one recognizes there's a 900-pound gorilla at the cocktail party, because that kind of sentence for a noncapital crime (or even a capital crime) means the real criminals have taken over the justice system. Because it's such an inspiring courtroom speech, I took the trouble to write down the entire scene of Preston Tucker's appeal to the jury:

Warning: the following passages give the outcome of the trial.

Tucker: Thank you your honor, thank you Senator Ferguson. (Ferguson is in the courtroom and obviously giving orders to the prosecutor and judge.)

Attorney: Tell them "an honest attempt" means not guilty. Tucker: The prosecution tells you I never made any attempt at all to make any cars, that all I wanted was to take the money and run. If you decide that they're right, well I'm guilty. But according to the law, if I tried to make the cars, even even if they weren't any good, even if I didn't even make any, but if you believe that I tried, well then I'm not guilty, because it's not against the law, thank God, to be wrong or stupid. Which I was both, building that prototype.

But what nobody has said for this whole trial is that after the prototype I built the car that I said I would, and there are 50 of them right now parked down there on Adams Street, all the judge has to do is let you walk down there and take a ride in one of them and that's it, the trial's over, okay your honor?

Prosecutor: Objection: This is a closing statement, evidence is no longer admissible.

Judge: Sustained.

Tucker: Will you allow the jury, please, to just look out the window, you can see them from here your honor...

Judge: Will the defendant please...

Tucker: They can look out and know whether I intended to build the cars or not.

Melee

Head Juror: Let the man speak, let the man speak! Let's hear the rest of it!

Judge: Silence. Judge threatens to declare a mistrial, "No more outbursts from anyone in this courtroom. You have one minute Mr. Tucker.

Tucker: Thank you.

When I was a boy I used to, used to read all about Edison, the Wright Brothers, Mr. Ford. They were, they were my heroes. Rags to riches, that's not just the name of a book, that's what this country was all about. We invented the free enterprise system, where anybody no matter who he was, where he came from, what class he belonged to, if he came up with a better idea, about anything, there's no limit to how far he could go.

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 everybody laughs at, that later turns out to revolutionize the world, he's squashed, from above, before he even gets his head out of the water. Because the bureaucrats they'd rather kill a new idea than let it rock the boat.

If Benjamin Franklin were alive today he'd be thrown in jail for sailing a kite without a license! [Laughter, jury rapt.]

It's true. We're all puffed with ourselves now 'cause now we invented the bomb, dropped the... [long pause] beat the daylights out of the Japanese, the Nazis.

But if big business closes the door on the little guy with the new idea, we're not only closing the door on progress, but we're sabotaging everything that we fought for, everything that the country stands for, [voice rising and breaking] and one day we're going to find ourselves at the bottom of the heap instead of king of the hill, having no idea how we got there, buying our radios and our cars from our former enemies. [Some snickers] Tucker chuckles, "I don't believe that's going to happen. I can't believe it because if I ever stop believing in the plain old common horse sense of the American people there'd be no way I could get out of bed in the morning.

Not guilty!

Here's a video/audio link to the speech, and, it turns out, a transcript. [Oh well, I wrote before Googling.] As to whether the speech is authentic, I have an idea it has to be close to the truth or Francis Ford Coppola would not have used it. In addition to the uplifting words, I come away from this scene with an awareness of the onetime power of juries... a power that the system has now steadily eroded by browbeating and intimidation. Modern juries would not have dared to stand up to the judges and prosecution, and any modern-day Tuckers that made it through the cartel meatgrinder would leave the courtroom in chains.

Before the trial, an individual of power and influence who stood up for Tucker, helping him find steel and motors, was Howard Hughes... also a victim of malicious cartel-government prosecution. Dean Stockwell plays the reclusive self-made millionaire, and in one perfect scene does a good enough job to win the best supporting actor award from the National Society of Film Critics and from the New York Film Critics Circle. (!)

This is an important movie for all time, a classic, but an important movie for our time, too, as we greet a remarkable new president with an uncertain understanding of free-market principles. In one focused little basket, Tucker shows what's wrong with the US auto industry, what's wrong with the business world in general (i.e. statism/fascism), and what's needed to right the wrongs: i.e. a grassroots jury of millions to break the chains and throw out the privileged 'royalty' who claim to own us. In fact, a litmus-test question for Barack Obama would be: "Who is more important to human progress: a charismatic leader of a strong central government or a Preston Tucker?"

Tucker is an American hero who deserves to be commemorated, in my humble opinion above any political figure since colonial times. Today is a fine time to recognize Tucker and reinvigorate the movement to place him at the top of the list. As I was researching this piece, I learned from the Ann Arbor (Michigan) News

that Preston Tucker's son died recently; the Tucker automobile club only has ~500 members worldwide. Somehow these two facts suggest to me that Tucker's legacy is losing attention when by all rights and necessity it should be gaining radically. Consider this exchange after the trial:

*Abe: Look, they love the cars. The people. Drives me crazy, Tucker Motor Company is dead, it'll never be made.*

*Tucker: We made 'em.*

*Abe: 50 cars.*

*Tucker: Well, what's the difference? 50 or 50 million, that's only machinery. It's the idea that counts, Abe... and [looking him in the eye] the dream.*

Perhaps that's fictional, but the following comes from the man in real life:

*"A man with a dream can't stop trying to realize that dream.... It's no disgrace to fail against tough odds if you don't admit you're beaten. And if you don't give up."*

Robert Preston Tucker, there is none higher. Get the word out.

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[1] And our dream car. My dad who had returned from the war and had roots in Chicago, ordered stock in the company. My mother informs me he was an extremely enthusiastic supporter through it all. Tucker was one of the most popular American industrial leaders of all time.

2009 January 22

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