



TUCKER 48

Rumors of conspiracy and corporate espionage sunk what could have been a bright future for the American car.

To call the Tucker 48, commonly known as the Tucker Torpedo, the “car of tomorrow” is an accurate reference, and it underscores the vision that Preston Tucker had for it. In the vivid postwar days of the late 1940s, visionaries and dreamers came out of the woodwork, hoping to fill the automotive void left by the Big Three—who had spent the war years building airplanes and artillery vehicles by the millions. As they retooled their factories and slowly shifted toward new car designs, it was the right moment to make an impact.

Preston Tucker entered the fray with his eponymous car company in 1946, launching his designs with sketches in *Science Illustrated*. “Torpedo on Wheels!” the cover proclaimed. The torpedo featured a sleek fastback design that occupied the shape’s entire rear end past the windshield. Pontoon fenders were placed at all four corners, and an egg-crate grille was split by three headlights up front, one directly in the middle.

However, those were the only similarities between the “Torpedo,” wildly radical even for Preston, and the handsome fastback sedan that made it to the production phase. This was styled by Alex S. Tremulis. After a falling out with Tucker and previous designer George Lawson, poor Tremulis only had six days to straighten out Lawson’s radical plans. That he did so with such skill only showcased the talents of an illustrious career, particularly with Ford. And his design was only a piece of the avant-garde Tucker mystique: fitted in the rear was a horizontally opposed six-cylinder engine originally built for Bell helicopters.

From its “Cyclops Eye” to its 166-horsepower engine, the Tucker radiated promise. To catch the public’s attention,

Tucker’s employees scrambled to hand-build 51 examples, many featuring the usual bevy of design flaws as well as overengineering hubris. Eventually, the Federal Securities and Exchange Commission came knocking on Tucker’s door, investigating his business and fundraising practices. The case dragged on, and while Tucker was eventually acquitted, his reputation was sunk.

Tucker suspected conspiracy. The Big Three automakers with the Michigan state senators in their pocket had banded together to sink what they saw as an emerging threat. In 1988, director Francis Ford Coppola explored this notion with a biopic of Preston, starring the charismatic Jeff Bridges, who captured Preston’s unwavering spirit in the face of the overwhelming, entrenched corporate powers that be.

The truth was far more straightforward, and therefore less interesting. Preston Tucker had both an outgoing personality and engineering ability—on the cusp of the Second World War, his Tucker Combat Car armored prototype could reach 100 mph (161 km/h)—but he simply needed money. His campaign to market accessories and dealership franchises before Tucker production was his downfall, even if such crowdfunding tactics seem ordinary today.

Preston Tucker could rest well knowing that the features he introduced on the Tucker 48 are now so standard as to be taken for granted—features such as disc brakes, independent suspension, continuously variable transmission, and headlights that swiveled with the front wheels, which Citroën would implement in the avant-garde DS. At the same time, if you prevent someone from living his dream, don’t expect him to forgive you.



Just 51 Tuckers were built, and the ones that aren't in car museums have sold for millions. The center-mounted headlight swiveled with the front wheels. However, many states outlawed cars with more than two headlights, so Tucker provided a cover that went over the center lights.

