

Our Changing Economy

'Launching' Is Set For High-Flying Car

By Philip Stoddard Brown

Washington Economist and Business Writer



Brown

Next Thursday, the Ford Motor Company will launch a comet, rather The Comet. "Launching" is the word used in one press release but another tells how the Comet's "inertia in motion keeps the wheels in contact with the

ground." In fact, the Comet has a device that "permits the wheel to ride backward, up, and over a bump" while going forward. This I don't understand but I infer this comet won't leave the ground—especially "on wash-board type roads"—but will give the driver a feel of power and flight and also a "smooth" ride.

The Comet is the embodiment of "high styling." Its lines are "graceful and flowing." At the same time, its nearly flat roof contributes "a clear angular line."

Like all cars these days, "the look is clean" but made interesting by plenty of chrome ornamentation. For smartness, there is an "anodized aluminum grille flanked with dual headlights." "The going-away view shows canted oval tail-lights and sturdy wrap-around bumper."

Nowhere in the bulky packet of press releases and pictures I received is there any reference to the Falcon, Ford's first "compact car," but some people may detect a similarity between these two miracles of American technology. Both are earth-bound, despite the connotation of their names, and they have other, albeit minor, similarities such as, for example, the same engine.

Actually the two cars are very different. The Comet is longer and has more trunk space. Automotive News calls it a "super-compact" because it's less compact. More important, the rear ash tray and armrests are standard equipment on the Comet. To be sure, 80 per cent of Falcons are sold with these and other items in a \$66 extra-trim package, as Ben Mills, General Manager of the Lincoln-Mercury Division of Ford Motor Company, points out. But this doesn't make the two cars in any way alike. . . . Well, anyway, they just aren't alike.

The Comet and Falcon are as dissimilar as two Dior dresses. The Comet is for the spring trade; the Falcon was a fall creation. Then too, their names are different.

Economic Consequences of High Styling

The auto industry is the great disrupter of our economy. In January, auto manufacturers lengthened workshifts and added extra shifts; subcontractors worked 'round the clock and pressured their suppliers for deliveries; wages were boosted by overtime at double pay.

The result of all this frantic, high-cost effort has been to build up a bigger stockpile of new cars than has ever before been created. Now, with more than a million unsold cars, we are in a period of 3- and 4-day work-weeks. Next will be the period of indefinite layoffs and unemployment benefits, instead of paychecks.

This madness is compounded by "high styling." In 1955, to satisfy a temporary surge in demand created by one year's successful styling and an easing of credit terms, nearly 8 million cars were produced. Tens of thousands of workers were recruited all over the South. Later, these workers were laid off abruptly and indefinitely. Suppliers were encouraged to expand and then left with idle plant, as the Big Three decided to subcontract a smaller fraction of a smaller amount of work.

The economic consequences of spending \$3000 for a car are very different from those of spending the same amount for food, clothing, theater and travel. To buy a car is to buy a ton or more of steel, 20 or 30 square feet of plate glass, yards of fabrics, paint and copper wire; a car embodies the work of thousands of people. Later, as the car is paid for, \$100 a month may be spent without creating work for anyone except the finance company's bookkeepers.

High Style Is for Women

High styling of autos makes for high social costs. How much higher they may go, one can only conjecture. General Motors' vice president for styling talks of the need for more tailoring of cars, more variety: of cars distinctly feminine and others masculine, cars to fit one's moods and one's clothes. Maybe one day, we'll all have wardrobes (or harems) of cars. . . . I hope not, for I deplore this transference or sublimation of sex. My advice to Detroit is to allow motor vehicles to stay neuter and leave high style for women.

The Comet is probably as good a buy as any other new car. But somehow as a prospective buyer I feel let down after comparing this car with the Ford of five years ago. The latter was the same size, more powerful and priced some \$300 less. Today, the 1955 Ford is old-fashioned, but next year the Comet of 1960 will be too.

What I don't understand is why the "Big Three" don't produce at least one car that isn't restyled annually and is free of "bugs." As Detroit has given more attention to styling, more people have switched to foreign cars. About 1½ million are in use, despite the added cost of ocean transportation, despite the discriminatory import tax they bear, despite the harassment of state licensing officials and all the problems of repair and servicing.

High styling hasn't been any boon to the dealers who sell new American-made cars. Their number declined by 2000 in the past year. In 1949, there were more than 49,000; now, there are 33,000. Thousands of dealers have turned to selling foreign cars that aren't restyled annually. Last year, the average Volkswagen dealer sold more cars than the average Ford or Chevrolet dealer and the profit per car was probably greater.

Well, everybody else has taken a fling at the American auto industry, so I figured it was my turn.