

UPDATE

Lincoln Continental

If you measure your car's worth
by the pound, it's a great buy.

by Don Fuller



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□ Mr. Middle America must like cars like this because he feels secure in them. As it rolls silently down the freeway you feel physically and mentally *secure*. Physically because this enormous Lincoln Continental is so big, is so vast, that you feel like the skipper of an 80-foot Chris-Craft making his way through a swarm of dinghies; you'll try not to hit anything as long as it doesn't take too much effort, but if you do . . . well, so what, it won't hurt *you* any.

And mentally because, at the wheel of this thing as you roll down your street and *imagine* envious looks on all your neighbors' faces, you know, deep inside, that you have *arrived* and nobody's gonna kick your tail.

It's understandable. Look at all your other problems. The government has got the whole world loused up terrible. Property taxes are doubling. You've got an ulcer. Your dog needs shots. But inside that Lincoln, man, oh man, you just lie back and relax and let that thing get you home. Turn on the stereo. Rest your little finger on the wheel. Stretch out. Let the air conditioner take care of all the smog and heat and stink of the city and enjoy a little sunshine through the Moon Roof.

*I'll be down to getcha in my taxi,
honey,
We'll blast off 'bout a-half past eight,
Now baby, don't be late,
I wanna be there when the band starts
playin' . . .*

And so an age of opulence, of easy livin' and cheap gasoline, of freedom from WW II (the Big One), and a house in suburbia and a big car in the driveway for everybody has come to this. This enormous, glorious, absurd, beautiful, gluttonous, luxurious monster of a Lincoln Continental. It is the final realization of what Detroit has been working towards for decades. Bigger is better. Freedom and power. Status. Comfort. *Security*.

If not designed it was at least germinated in the past. It is a device of the '50s. Before roads got crowded and gas went to 60 cents. When people actually took cross country summer vacations in their family cars. *Route 66*. Ostentatiousness wasn't a dirty word in the '50s; it was a sign you were to be respected.

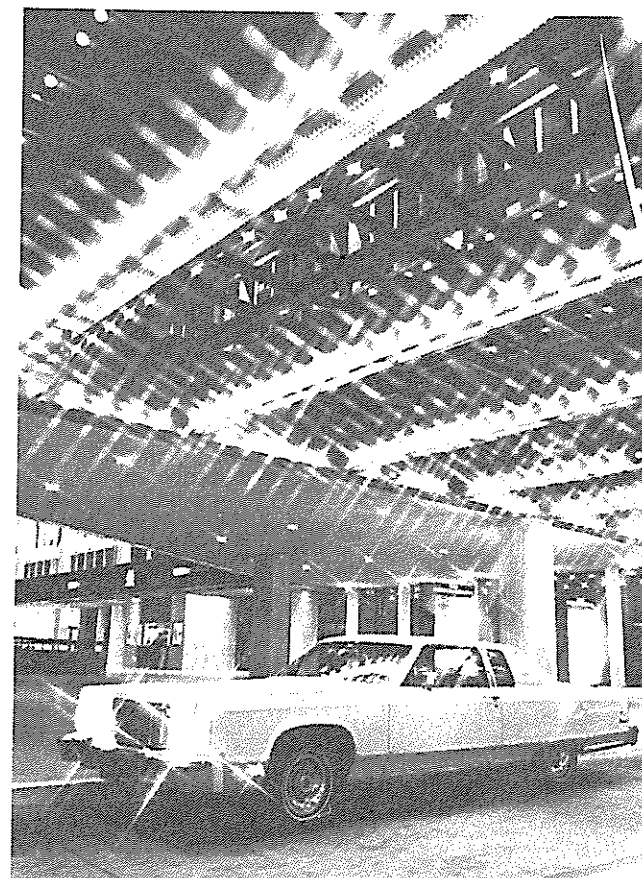
Now it just means you haven't kept up with the times.

For some strange reason, maybe the calming effect on the ulcer or the peace of mind, big cars are again big sellers in the showrooms. The energy crunch was a couple of years ago and 60 cents isn't so bad when you get used to it. Maybe Mr. Middle America feels that cars like this won't be around much longer so he'd better get one while he can. Maybe he just likes that security and, after all, you can't knock over decades-old habits and preferences just by one or two years of a little gasoline problem.

So big cars are back in style. A glance at the business section of the paper verifies it. And the Lincoln so typifies them that it is almost a caricature; in fact, they are probably all caricatures.

This year's Lincoln is not much different than last year's. The sheet metal is the same and the mechanicals are basically the same. We tested one last year (*RT*, May, '75) and this year's car was the same two-door body but equipped differently. It had no cruise control or climate control but it did have the Moon Roof, which is a glass sunroof that operates electrically and includes a manual shade to block out the sun. It also did not have the four-wheel disc brake and Sure-Trac option of the '75 model, instead using a normal disc front/drum rear arrangement. The sorest point last year was the stopping distance, which was a lengthy 191 feet. Lincoln-Mercury was miffed and sent two engineers to look at the car and recheck the brakes. We then reran the tests in different conditions and recorded stopping distances in the 170 to 180 foot range. This year the only performance test of the car we conducted was the stopping distance, and we found that if you nail the pedal hard at 60 mph the big Lincoln will slide to a stop in around 200 feet, but if you are *very* careful on the pedal you may be able to get it stopped in about 170. And that puts it right in the ballpark with other American sedans its size.

Although we know there was nothing dimensionally different



about it, for some reason this year's car didn't feel as impressive as last year's. There was nothing *wrong* with it; on the contrary last year's car had been the victim of thievery and a strip job and this one was in excellent shape. Maybe it was because it lacked some of the interior options, but it just didn't feel as good. We certainly don't feel that any potential Lincoln owner would be disappointed at all, but then we are, in all honesty, not potential Lincoln owners. Somehow, this car just doesn't make much sense for the last quarter of the 20th century. Assuming that the average life of a car may be around eight or ten years we just can't imagine actually owning this thing in 1984, for instance. (Had you forgotten it was that close?)

But we also know that little of this will matter to a Lincoln (or Chrysler, or Buick, or Oldsmobile, or Cadillac) buyer. He is likely not bothered with the social concerns or the long range energy availability planning of today or tomorrow. He wants, maybe even needs, that big car for his own security. He likes the reclining comfort of that leather-covered sofa of a seat and the quiet isolation of the two-ton-plus body. Maybe next time he'll have to buy small, something "little" like a Granada, but for now and as long as possible he will really like that big car. It flies in the face of all rational thought. It makes no economic sense. It is hard to park and takes up the whole garage (when it fits at all). It is unsuited to any type of driving except relatively slow speeds on smooth roads.

But that is precisely the kind of driving Mr. Middle America does. And nobody ever said cars were unemotional or rational purchases anyway; if they were we would all drive Checker Marathons or VW Microbuses. The Continental is a big, obvious symbol of American success. It impresses clients and lunch dates. It makes you feel good to step out of it when you go out to dinner. It tells the world you have arrived in a bigger, louder way than if you posted handbills all over town. It is a massive, calming ego trip and when Mr. Middle America drives into the driveway, steps out, walks up to the house and turns around to look at it before going in, it is *there*. ■