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The American Nightmare: The Ford Edsel Flop and Sputnik Terror

With fears mounting that Communism would establish a foothold in the Americas, American officials stood in horror as a communist-led attack on American tariffs in 1958 caused “US prestige [to become] extremely low [in Peru] lately.” Trying to calm the raging storm, Vice President Richard Nixon travelled to Lima, Peru to clear up a “shocking misunderstanding of United States policies.” Hoping to showcase “US prestige,” Nixon decided to parade through the streets of Lima in the car of the future, the Ford Edsel. Instead Nixon was greeted by “2,000 jeering, fist shaking youths and adults,” as Nixon’s Edsel was pelted with “a Communist barrage of...stones, eggs, and oranges.”¹ When reporters asked about the incident later, a bruised and bloodied “Nixon joked ‘they were throwing eggs at the car, not me.’”²

Ironically there was some truth to this joke, but the reason why would horrify the Vice President. From the remote streets of Lima to the headquarters of America’s most powerful media giants, it seemed everyone was pelting Ford Motor Company’s ill-fated Edsel. What was supposed to be the car of the future and an emblem of American prestige had turned into a symbol of America’s sharp decline. Two years earlier, Ford promised consumers riding on the waves of economic good times that they would no longer have to settle for their old entry-level Ford’s. Instead of allowing middle-class Ford customers to defect to General Motor’s flashy medium-price brands that showed personality and prestige, in 1957 Ford launched the Edsel as the perfect car for these “professional ...

¹ Tad Szulc, “Nixon is Stoned By Peru Rioters Headed By Reds,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1958: pg. 1.

² James Barron, “After 50 years, the Edsel is no longer regarded as an ugly car but is cherished by its (few) owners,” *New York Times*, August 7, 2007: A1.

famil[ies].”³ Yet soon after the Edsel launched, the Soviet Union’s Sputnik satellite made the good times come to a grinding halt. The triumphant America that Ford designed the Edsel for ceased to exist once the Soviets seemingly conquered outer space, and the failed Edsel only fueled America’s fears that they were slipping behind the Russians. Ultimately Ford tried selling excess, American technological prowess, and the American Dream when the Edsel and Sputnik were proof that all three were in jeopardy.

Despite defeating the Nazis and the Japanese Empire merely five years prior, by the early 1950s America’s victory celebration had long since ended. With communism spreading into China and the Soviets armed with nuclear weapons, the general public and some in government began to fear that the Soviets would soon eclipse America as “the most powerful nation in the world.”⁴ As if the overseas crisis was not enough, Americans feared Communism was infecting and weakening the United States at home. Democracy itself seemed under siege, as Senator Joe McCarthy warned the public that the State Department were infested with “105 known Communists... [such as official] Alger Hiss.”⁵ In fact the Soviets claimed they had “the positive loyalty of important...government officials!”⁶ Hollywood was under their thumb, with “Russian...families...with communism in their blood” like the iconic Warner Brothers supposedly turning American film into Communist propaganda.⁷ Worst of all, Americans “for the first time since 1815” no longer felt safe at

³ Thomas E. Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn: The Story of the Edsel*, (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2002) 110.

⁴ Andrea Carosso, *Cold War Narratives: American culture in the 1950s*, (Bern, Germany, Peter Lang, 2012) 16.

⁵ Carosso, *Cold War Narratives*, 10.

⁶ Robert H. Zieger, "The evolving cold war: the changing character of the enemy within, 1949-63." *American Communist History* 3, no. 1 (June 2004): 3-23. *America: History and Life with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 29, 2016), 14.

⁷ Carosso, *Cold War Narratives*, 20.

home.⁸ Stories of Soviet spies like the Rosenbergs made families wonder if the new neighbors across the street were really agents in “an active Soviet spy network in the US,” and schoolchildren practiced “duck and cover” under their desks because “a nuclear attack could strike at any time without warning.”⁹ These dark events created a pervasive fear that America was in dire straits.

Yet following President Eisenhower’s election in 1952, America seemed to be emerging out of these dark times. McCarthyism began to fade, culminating in Senator McCarthy’s censure from the Senate in 1954. The Soviet Union was somewhat less of a threat, as “Stalin’s death [in 1953 allowed for] easing the Cold War” since his successor Khrushchev seemed open to reform.¹⁰ World War III seemed less imminent, as Eisenhower’s “New Look” foreign policy cut runaway defense spending that was “draining [America’s] wealth and labor.” Instead of funding a conventional army prepared for imminent war, Eisenhower transitioned American into “the long haul” by “relying on enhanced nuclear forces” so powerful that Moscow would never dare directly challenge the United States.¹¹

As the foreign situation improved, the booming American economy became a vent for citizens to showcase American prestige and became a part of the national identity. Now the “heady 1920s seemed pale in comparison,” as Americans bragged of having “the highest standard of living of any nation in the history of the world.” In fact, *Life* magazine went as far to say that “depressions, [and] recessions” were things of the past. Throughout the

⁸ Zieger, *Evolving Cold War*, 15.

⁹ Carosso, *Cold War Narratives*, 29-30.

¹⁰ Zieger, *Evolving Cold War*, 13.

¹¹ Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930's*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 192-195.

decade, America's gross national product exploded by 250%, transforming America into a "consumer economy" with aims far beyond providing "simple human needs such as shelter, food, and clothing." American households became filled with new laundry machines, better refrigerators, and nicer cars in the driveway. Most importantly, the economy became yet another battleground for the Cold War. It now became the duty of the citizen to spend into the economy to ensure "Capitalist plenty vs. Socialist penury," as economic abundance and "freedom... [seemed] interdependent." Ultimately consumer spending became an American way of life as important as democracy itself.¹²

At the pinnacle of this roaring economy, the American automobile industry's massive growth was a perfect showcase for America's prestige. Now it too was a vent to showcase American strength. Suddenly there were "more cars in the United States than the rest of the world put together," and America's "Big Three" of Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler controlled 99% of all sales.¹³ In fact, from pre-war 1941 to 1955 America went from producing only 3,250,000 passenger cars annually to over eight million. Furthermore cars had "more powerful engines... automatic transmissions... [and company's now had to focus on] style, comfort, and safety."¹⁴

Above all else, there were now plenty of options besides old entry-level cars or untouchable luxuries. In 1950, General Motors unleashed "absolute pandemonium" in the industry by using the same body for all of their cars. While General Motors had "a body interchangeability program" since the 1920s, the "1950... program... carried the concept to unimaginable heights and left all of its competitors in the dust" by allowing all GM cars to

¹² Corosso, *Cold War Narratives*, 39-52.

¹³ Corosso, *Cold War Narratives*, 53-54.

¹⁴ John Bell Rae, *The American Automobile Industry*, (Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1985) 161-187.

have “the same basic body!” This was a gigantic cost saver, allowing General Motors to invest money instead into differentiating their brands through ornamentation and technology. All of these innovations strengthened General Motors’ longstanding ladder of consumption, since General Motors could use their savings to augment their cars far more than their competitors. This benefited their entry-level Chevrolet, their medium-priced Pontiac, Buick, and Oldsmobile brands, and it allowed their luxury Cadillacs to create a “a halo effect” for the rest of the company.¹⁵ The average American might not have been able to afford a Cadillac, but its prestige brought attention to the company and its lower brands.

Additionally, companies increasingly began to advertise their cars as “ personal expressions of the psyche of the owner.”¹⁶ The days of parking lots filled with identical Model T’s were long gone, as advertisers sold cars that appealed to consumer’s deepest subliminal desires like “sex, security, and prestige.” Now consumers were spending “a little extra money for a little something exciting” after the dark days of the War, and they flocked to General Motors’ “personal... [and] intimate” cars.¹⁷ It did not matter that the cars were not mechanically different; instead automakers emphasized their cars’ personality. For instance, General Motors crafted a prestigious image in a 1957 Cadillac advertisement to attract upper-class buyers. General Motors’ advertisers surrounded the Cadillac with glimmering jewels, with a sparkling Cadillac emblem serving as the crown jewel. GM emphasized its “sheer beauty” and “majesty” throughout the page, creating a perfect image

¹⁵ Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 63- 150.

¹⁶ Charles Goodrum, *Advertising in America: The First Two Hundred Years*, (New York, Harry N Abrams, 1990) 341.

¹⁷ Juliann Sivulka, *Sex, Soap, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising*, (Boston, Cengage Learning, 1997) 248-266.

for Americans wanting to show their wealth. All of these efforts left no doubt that a Cadillac “suggested a [luxurious] lifestyle.”¹⁸

Yet the personalized car was not unique to luxury; companies crafted personalized images for their medium priced brands as well. For instance a Buick appealed to “professionals and families,” and sports cars like the Corvette were “workhorses” and “mistresses.”¹⁹ Suddenly America’s newfound citizen consumers flocked to these personalized brands, as 60% of all car sales were medium priced.²⁰ With much more options than its competitors, General Motors stood tall as the undisputed champion of the car industry.

Yet fast approaching on GM’s tail was the original American car company, Ford Motor Company. After years of mismanagement and stubbornness to adapt to a market no longer satisfied with entry-level cars, in 1945 Henry Ford II’s leadership brought what *Fortune* magazine called the “rebirth of Ford.” Analytical “whiz kids” like Robert McNamara and Ernest Breech joined the company to modernize its byzantine management structure that once placed all power in the hands of Henry Ford and fix its “non-existent... financial controls.” By the end of the Korean War, Ford surpassed Chrysler and became second only to General Motors.²¹

Buoyed by their success, Henry Ford II began to have dreams of beating the hated General Motors “car for car.” However by 1956, there were still serious issues holding Ford

¹⁸ Heon Stevenson, *American Automobile Advertising, 1930-1980*, (Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland and Company, 2008) 190.

¹⁹ Rae, *American Automobile*, 180.

Goodrum, *Advertising Age*, 241.

²⁰ “The Edsel Story,” last modified July 9, 2010, <https://archive.org/details/TheEdselStory>.

²¹ Douglas Brinkley, *Wheels for the World: Henry Ford, his Company, and a Century of Progress*, (London: Penguin Group, 2003) 524-529.

Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 55.

back. While the entry-level Ford competed with Chevrolet and the Thunderbird sports car could “compete in image with Corvettes,” Ford’s medium priced options were seriously lacking. General Motors had three brands to attract buyers, but Ford only had the Mercury brand. Yet the “plain” Mercury did not appeal to many drivers, and Ford felt it was because “it did not make them look any richer” than the entry-level did.²² When entry-level Ford customers grew out of their price market, 74% defected to either Chrysler or General Motors. Conversely General Motors kept 78% of their customers. However in 1956, executive Lewis Crusoe had a solution. Starting in 1957, Ford Motor Company would offer four car divisions, the entry-level Ford, the medium-priced Edsel and Mercury divisions, and the luxury Lincoln.²³

Thinking national prosperity would never end, Ford tailor-made the Edsel division to fit “the younger executive or professional family on its way up” in a “growing America.”²⁴ The Edsel would have “unexcelled leadership in its [price] field,” and it would be a performing modern car that’s “uniqueness shall be a requisite.” Immediately Edsel designers implemented these goals into the car, creating what Henry II saw as a car with “graceful styling... but not too radical.”²⁵ Instead of the typical horizontal grille, drivers would immediately recognize an Edsel by its “strong and original... vertical grille.” “No other American car” looked anything like it, only “high-grade cars being built in Europe” did. In addition Ford filled the car with the latest technological gadgets, making it “the

²² Brinkley, *Wheels for the World*, 564-576.

²³ “The Edsel Story.”

²⁴ “The Edsel Story.”

²⁵ “The Edsel Story.”

epitome of the push-button era... without [over the top] Buck Rodgers concepts” ruining things.²⁶

With the Edsel designed, Ford readied it for a spectacular launch on September 4, 1957. After news of the Edsel leaked to industry magazine *Motor Trend*, Ford spent fifty millions dollars on the most expensive marketing campaign in history. Executives went on pyrotechnic-filled speaking tours; mysterious advertising littered magazines like *Life*; and new dealerships sprouted throughout the country, all culminating in a launch show in Dearborn filled with stunt drivers, car giveaways, and a special Edsel nightclub after party for industry heads and the media. All of this was centered on three marketing goals, emphasizing that it was a “smart car,” a car for “younger...professional...families,” and that it was a symbol of the American Dream. When E-Day finally came, it seemed everyone “wanted to know about the new Edsel.”²⁷ Three million Americans filled Edsel dealerships, and newspapers like the *New York Times* praised the car’s “mechanical innovations” and “spectacular...difference in style” from other cars.²⁸

As millions of excited Americans finally caught their first glimpses of the anticipated Edsel, the Edsel’s family message fit perfectly into Cold War values. In the face of the atheist and immoral Communist hordes, throughout the 1950s Americans stressed traditional values such as religion and family. Much of this seeped into advertising, as advertisements often “reinforced family values... idealized versions of Mom, Dad, Junior, and Sis.” For instance, a new Frigidaire would make a housewife feel like the queen of the household, as the ad glorified “the lady of the house.” Other ads showcase wives as “dedicated

²⁶ Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 85- 87

²⁷ Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 110-123.

²⁸ Jodeph C. Ingraham, “Edsel offer Style Innovation,” *New York Times*, Aug 27, 1957, AI.

homemakers... [who only wished to] pamper their husband,” and Coca-Cola advertisements glorified sons playing baseball with their friends and daughters learning how to sew from their mothers.²⁹

With these ads in mind, the Edsel’s focus on All-American families fit perfectly in this Cold War atmosphere.³⁰ Throughout Ford’s ads they sought to emphasize “spirited but responsible [young] adventurers,” even going as far as to create half an hour advertisements of Edsel owners going on various trips.³¹ Middle class families tuning into their televisions watched ads such as *What an Adventure*, a story of a young family using their Edsel to escape the monotony of New York City life and go fishing in Montauk, Long Island. After catching a giant fish, the exuberant son exclaimed “what a swell Dad I’ve got” as the family drove away in their Edsel. However Ford also targeted young couples on their way up in society, as the *West of the Tetons* advertisement shows. Ford’s “spirited but responsible adventurers” traveled through the mountainside in their Edsel, as the wife praised her husband for being smart and “up to date with the latest gadgets.” In fact, virtually every print Edsel ad showcased professional men dressed in suits with their young families, leaving no doubt that this was their target market.³²

Yet a month to the day of E-Day, shocking news broke that the Soviet Union beat America to outer space. Ironically the American government “never felt ...we were in a race with the Soviets” into space; in fact President Eisenhower and many scientists in the

²⁹ “It’s pause time...mother” and “part of the game,” The Advertisement Archives, Ad# 30578104 and 30578112, 1950s collection.

³⁰ Sivulka, *American Advertising*, 253-258.

³¹ Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 110.

³² “What a vacation” and “West of Tetons,” last modified July 7, 2010, <https://archive.org/details/Edsel-WhatAVacation>.

American missile program were far more concerned with “the public’s overreaction.”³³ The United States had their own satellite prepared for 1958, and Eisenhower saw no pressing need to speed up the launch. Yet the American people sharply disagreed. Stunned Americans watching NBC news coverage listened to Sputnik’s “eerie beep beep... beep from somewhere out in space,” and in that moment Eisenhower’s “long haul” focused “New Look” foreign policy collapsed.³⁴ Now it seemed “an enemy attack... [by ICBM’s] could wipe out...the entire nuclear deterrent” that had made war seem so unlikely, bringing the worst of the Red Scare back to America. Extravagance came under fire, citizens doubted the American Dream, and the old insidious fear that America was slipping behind returned. Suddenly, the America Ford designed the Edsel for no longer existed. Instead the United States was readying to face a new “Sputnik challenge,” and the Edsel’s marketing only emphasized all that was wrong with the past.³⁵

Perhaps the central focus of the Edsel campaign was that it represented the American Dream. It was the car for all the young Americans “on their way up,” and Ford now had “the E-car [that] has faith in you son, we’ll help you make it!”³⁶ For this reason, Ford stressed throughout their marketing that the Edsel was a prestige symbol. Looking at

³³ Robert A. Divine, *The Sputnik Challenge*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993) xiv.

³⁴ Since nuclear war theoretically ensured mutual destruction, President Eisenhower did not think America could defeat the Soviets in a hot war. Instead Eisenhower prepped America for a “decades long” cold and indirect battle with the Soviets, cutting spending for conventional armed forces and increasing funding for a nuclear deterrent. This allowed Eisenhower to balance budgets and invest in the economy, since the nuclear deterrent was far cheaper than a massive conventional military. However once Sputnik launched, hawks in government feared the Russians would be able to build Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles that would make American B-52 bomber planes obsolete. Suddenly Americans doubted if the United States would win this long battle and instead argued for a more direct approach with the Soviets. Now Eisenhower had to increase defense spending, destroying his “New Look” policy. See, Sherry, *Shadow of War*, pages 192-195, 214-218.

³⁵ Divine, *Sputnik Challenge*, 1-34.

³⁶ Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 110.

the 1958 ad “They’ll know you’ve *arrived* when you drive up in an Edsel”, the American Dream is the central focus. Claims that neighbors will envy “your Edsel” and will take “another look” in awe litter the page, and the advertisement’s ideal family was proof that Edsel owners have “*arrived*.” The family was everything an American man could hope to have, with his new Post-War home, glistening Edsel, and his smiling wife and children excited for him to come home from work.³⁷

However with Sputnik patrolling the “Commie sky [sic],” Americans began to doubt that this hopeful future was possible any longer.³⁸ Frustrated over Sputnik, Ford executives bemoaned that “Americans suddenly began to question the validity of the American Dream itself,” and to Ford’s horror they were right.³⁹ News of Sputnik sent America into a massive panic not seen since the early 1950s, as once again it seemed America would lose its fight with the dreaded Soviet Union. Americans cowered as politicians like Senator Lyndon B. Johnson warned that the Soviets would use Sputnik to impose “tyranny... [with] control [of] the Earth’s water, to cause drought and flood.... to divert the Gulf Stream and change temperatures to frigid!” Some scientists were even more extreme, with one claiming the Soviets could create a lunar base from which to attack America. Other influential officials like Henry Kissinger feared that the Soviets would reduce the United States to “Fortress America in a world in which we had become largely irrelevant.”⁴⁰ Manhattan Project scientist George Price went as far to say “by no later than 1975, America will be [a puppet

³⁷ “They’ll know you’ve arrived when you drive up in an Edsel” The Advertisement Archives – Ad# 21056702. 1950s Collection.

³⁸ Sherry, *Shadow of War*, 214.

³⁹ Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 143.

⁴⁰ Sherry, *Shadow of War*, 214.

state] of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics!”⁴¹ Even Frank Sinatra in Ford’s *Edsel Show* joked that Bob Hope would be “the first man to entertain the troops in space.”⁴² Of course these claims were hyperbolic, but this onslaught from influential Americans made the fears appear all too real to the public.

The national media would only pour gasoline on this already raging fire. Magazines like *Life* proclaimed that Sputnik was the new “Lexington and Concord,” and Americans “need to respond as the Minutemen did.” Others compared Sputnik’s importance to “the discovery of America by Columbus.”⁴³ A *New York Times* cartoon showed Sputnik satellites patrolling the sky of a world in chains, calling the Russian threat as serious as Hitler’s Luftwaffe was to Britain.⁴⁴ In fact the *Times* shared Henry Kissinger’s fear that the Soviets could use Sputnik as proof to the world that they were “the strongest military and scientific power.”⁴⁵ Worst of all, some questioned if it was even possible for “a loose Democracy [to] compete with a... dictatorship.”⁴⁶ With this much panic over the future of the United States, Ford’s message of a bright American future fell on deaf ears.

Similarly, Sputnik created massive issues for Ford’s claim that the Edsel was a car so stylish others should jealously compliment “the owner’s style and good taste.”⁴⁷ In this new United States, the Edsel’s styling symbolized all that was keeping America behind the Soviets. Edsel ad’s often emphasized the Edsel’s “most beautiful” styling in the face of the “humdrum” “lookalike cars” that dominated American roads. The most common Edsel print

⁴¹ Zieger, *Evolving Cold War*, 10.

⁴² “The Edsel Show.”

⁴³ Divine, *Sputnik Challenge*, xiv-xvi.

⁴⁴ “How the World reacted to Sputniks,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1957, A1.

⁴⁵ Harry Schwartz, “Soviet Exploits its New Sputnik Diplomacy,” *New York Times*, October 10, 1957, A2.

⁴⁶ Zieger, *Evolving Cold War*, 16.

⁴⁷ Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 110.

ad was the “Dramatic Edsel Styling Leads the Way” campaign, which showcased the cars flashy and “elegant” look. Magazine readers saw images of Edsels driving by the ocean, in New York City, and highways across America; everywhere it went Ford claimed “your Edsel is watched eagerly” by envious drivers. After all, the car was crafted with “you [sic] ideas,” not by some out of touch executive.⁴⁸ Even Frank Sinatra praised the Edsel for being “a *nice* car” during CBS’s *The Edsel Show*.⁴⁹

However by 1957, Sputnik and changing consumer appetites made excess feel frivolous. As automobile historian John Rae describes, “somewhere between the planning and the unveiling of the Edsel public preference turned away from the big, ornate cars that had dominated” the decade. The shock of the Sputnik launch renewed the urgency of America’s fight against communism, making Americans view excess as a distraction from this fight. Even before Sputnik, Americans were growing tired of gigantic and gaudy cars that needed “new and bigger garage[s] to house.”⁵⁰ Yet the Edsel ads were proof that Detroit was not listening. Since 1954, public polls showed Americans enjoyed simple ornaments and grilles on their cars, and industry magazines like *Motor Trend* began to complain that only “stylists” made American cars instead of “engineers and drivers.”⁵¹ The Edsel’s negative reviews would only intensify this national disappointment in American cars, since almost all criticized its look. *Motor Trend* felt it was not as revolutionary as “all the fanfare of the past two years” suggested; *Consumer Reports* found it ugly; and of course

⁴⁸ “Dramatic Edsel Styling leads the Way,” *The Advertisement Archives* – Ad# 21056702, 1950s Collection.

⁴⁹ “The Edsel Show,” last modified March 11, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ze0Az9tdk875>.

⁵⁰ Rae, *American Automobile*, 206-211.

⁵¹ Floyd Clymer “Report to Detroit: A nationwide survey on what car owners want,” *Popular Mechanics*, February, 1954, 2.

Time magazine would infamously say it looked like “an Oldsmobile sucking a lemon.” Three years later, companies like American Motors would answer these complaints, as they sold the public “common sense, socially responsible... [compact cars instead of Detroit’s] gas-hog dinosaurs.” However in 1957, consumers did not have this option and the frustration brewed.⁵²

The Sputnik threat also intensified problems with the Edsel’s “dramatic styling.”⁵³ Suddenly Americans saw it as frivolous, as it fed into a narrative that America was in a Roman Empire-esque fall into decadence and excess. Just as the “Visigoths sacked” a distracted Rome, there was a growing sense that Americans “blessed with... [luxury could not compete] with the disciplined Red masses.” Americans did not want to sacrifice for the “free world’s” survival; instead these “selfish and feckless citizens” only cared about “the height of the tail fin in the new car” or, as *Life* magazine lamented, “who wins the World Series.”⁵⁴ Even President Eisenhower criticized the public for letting “opulence [dull] the spirit.” In fact Gallup polls showed 50% showed “no particular alarm” at Sputnik, and another revealed four million Americans had not even heard of it. *Life* stood in horror as some in the “complacent majority” ignored Sputnik and wanted to “let others worry about” it.⁵⁵ A frightened American media also aimed their sights at the youth, since American schools were filled with “stupid children” far too focused on “clubs [and] school newspapers.”⁵⁶ Ultimately the American economy seemingly became its “glory and its

⁵² Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 144-197.

⁵³ “Dramatic Edsel Styling leads the Way,” The Advertisement Archives – Ad# 21056702, 1950s Collection.

⁵⁴ Sherry, *Shadow of War*, 216.

⁵⁵ Zieger, *Evolving Cold War*, 12-22.

⁵⁶ Divine, *Sputnik Challenge*, 52-53.
Sherry, *Shadow of War*, 239.

nemesis,” and to Ford’s horror the frivolous Edsel was increasingly a symbol of the nemesis.⁵⁷

Furthermore, Sputnik and the Edsel’s widespread technological failures ate away at Ford’s claim that it was a “smart car.”⁵⁸ Again, Ford truly believed they had created the car of the future, and they were ready to prove it by glorifying the car’s technology. The Edsel’s “advanced features” were the centerpiece of many ads, a perfect example being its advertisements in the *New York Times*. Ford boasted that their new “Teletouch Transmission... [would] put shifting in its place,” as drivers could “shift without lifting a hand from the wheel.” Now Teletouch “does the work for you- smoothly, surely... *electrically*.” No longer did brakes need “periodic tightening”; now the Edsel had “self-adjusting breaks.”⁵⁹ During the primetime television special *The Edsel Show*, Ford showcased the Edsel’s sparkling and powerful V-8 engine, claiming it “outperforms any medium-priced car you’ve ever driven.”⁶⁰

However the Edsel’s widespread technological problems destroyed this message, playing into a narrative that America was falling behind in science and technology. Part of this simply was bad luck for Ford, as labor strikes struck right when production needed to start for E-Day. When manufacturers were finally able to get back to work, Edsel’s “were churned out as quickly as possible” and “quality suffered.” Ultimately Edsel’s did not have the most “advanced features” as Ford claimed; instead they were made with rushed parts assembled at the “last-minute.” All too often owners had “absolutely dreadful experiences” with their Edsel, and the bad news spread through “word of mouth advertising.” Amazingly,

⁵⁷ Zeiger, *Evolving Cold War*, 19.

⁵⁸ Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 110.

⁵⁹ *New York Times*, September 15, 1957.

⁶⁰ “The Edsel Show.”

Ford accidentally sent a car meant for the general public to *Motor Trend* instead of their meticulously prepared test car, and just like the others it was full of issues. Readers of the most influential magazine in the industry heard the truth, as the *Motor Trend* car's "windshield leaked" and "transmission motor burnt out."⁶¹ As the stories continued to worsen, people began to joke that Edsel stood for "Every Day Something Else Leaks."⁶²

Yet the Edsel was not the only technological embarrassment lining the headlines, since Sputnik unleashed a wave of fears over American science that only made Ford's issues worse. Key advisors to President Eisenhower warned "the Russians were emphasizing science more heavily in their schools... Unless the United States speeded up their scientific programs, within ten years the Russians would be ahead." While President Eisenhower still believed America eventually would win a prolonged Cold War, the national media and a frightened public were swept into a frenzy over it. Eisenhower's assurances that the Russians only educated a "talented elite" and that most were "spurned" fell on deaf ears, as the media ripped the educational system to shreds. *Life* blasted American schools for giving "milk shake slurping, slack jawed" "stupid children... better care than the bright" who only "found boredom" in American schools.⁶³ Senators like Lyndon Johnson asserted that the Russians had "twice as many math and science teachers." Even after Eisenhower increased education funding, critics still demanded "a much larger number."⁶⁴

⁶¹ Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 198.

⁶² Matt Haig, *Brand Failures: The Truth About the 100 Biggest Branding Mistakes of All Time*. (London: Kogan Page, 2011.) 20.

⁶³ Sherry, *Shadow of War*, 228.

Zieger, *Evolving Cold War*, 12.

⁶⁴ Divine, *Sputnik Challenge*, 13-54.

Instead of a triumphant message to the world that America was firmly in control, America's first satellite only fed fuel to the fire. The American's Vanguard I had been in development long before the Sputnik launch, and the American public was already angry over broken promises that it would be "the first in space." Yet when it was finally finished it was an absolute embarrassment. The greatest country on Earth could only muster a satellite that was a third of the size of Sputnik II, and a fuel leak left it unable to even leave the launchpad.⁶⁵ Once again a fallible America became the butt of jokes that dominated newspaper headlines across the globe, with the *New York Times* listing headlines such as "Kaputnik...Stay-Putnik...Flopnik... [and] Puffnick."⁶⁶ While America would eventually get an "Uncle Samnik" into orbit in 1958, Sputnik's damage to American prestige still left ugly scars.⁶⁷ Unfortunately for Ford, the Edsel was just another example of America's failures in technology.

At the same time that Edsel advertisements failed to attract American consumers, internal struggles ravaged Ford and marked the beginning of the end for the Edsel. In fact historians such as Thomas E. Bonsall and Tom Dicke often cite this infighting as the central reason for the Edsel's failure, arguing that it prevented Ford from salvaging the faltering brand. After all, Mercury had "almost identical... market segment penetration" to the Edsel when it was launched in 1939, and Ford was able to salvage that into a moderately successful brand.⁶⁸ Why not the Edsel?

⁶⁵ Divine, *Sputnik Challenge*, xiii- 58.

⁶⁶ Special to the *New York Times*, "Enoughnik of this," *New York Times*, December 8, 1957, A1.

⁶⁷ Divine, *Sputnik Challenge*, 95.

⁶⁸ Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 204.

In contrast to Mercury, Robert McNamara's whiz kids saw the Edsel as a financial black hole that needed to end, sending them into a bitter fight with the Edsel division. McNamara had always been a critic of the Edsel experiment and favored the base-line Ford, and the dark storm surrounding the car's launch only empowered him. After McNamara fired many Edsel supporters, by 1958 the whiz kids began to take the upper hand and shift the Edsel out. Suddenly the "Lincoln and Mercury [divisions] were collapsed into" one, which sliced their funding and hurt their halo effect for the Edsel. If Ford was unwilling "to commit the resources necessary" to establish Lincoln and Mercury as their own divisions, Dicke argues "any compelling reason to keep the Edsel division... or even...[the] line" alive was destroyed. With Ford Motor Company switching their focus back to the baseline Ford and horrible headlines dominating the press, it became much easier for McNamara to plan to eventually kill the Edsel and have the Mercury brand as the sole medium-priced offering.⁶⁹

In the years following 1957, Ford launched new Edsel division cars twice. Yet each time, the Edsel received less and less funding and looked less and less unique. While Ford "publically [supported] the Edsel," behind close doors Ford had already made "plans to ease it out the market." By 1960, everything that made an Edsel an Edsel was stripped from the car, as its signature vertical grille vanished. Some at Ford such as CEO Henry Ford II fought to save the Edsel, as he urged frightened Edsel dealers not to abandon Ford. However by 1960, the Edsel's problems proved to be insurmountable. On November 19, 1960 Ford announced to the public that the Edsel division was no more. Ultimately the

⁶⁹ Tom Dicke, "The Edsel: Forty Years as a Symbol of Failure," *Journal Of Popular Culture* 43, no. 3: 486-502, *America: History and Life with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 25, 2016), 493-494.

Edsel only sold 110,000 cars, and sales had been in a downward spiral for the past two years.⁷⁰

Ironically, Nixon was right when he joked that the communists were egging “the car, not me.”⁷¹ However it was for all the wrong reasons, as the Edsel played into fears that America was slipping behind the Soviet Union. Ultimately Ford’s emphasis on excess, advanced technology, and the American Dream fell on deaf ears. Instead the very product the advertisers were selling was proof that all three were in jeopardy. As the *Wall Street Journal* stated, “the consumer is a dictator without peer.” They wielded that power violently when they axed Ford’s dream car, proving the Edsel’s heralded “you [sic] ideas” never truly existed.⁷² The car of the future was another flopnik, and no amount of advertising ingenuity could save it.

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⁷⁰ Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 150-204.

⁷¹ Tad Szulc, “Nixon is Stoned By Peru Rioters Headed By Reds,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1958: pg. 1.

⁷² Bonsall, *Disaster in Dearborn*, 194.

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