

From the beginning, the Thunderbird was an untried concept, and not everyone at Ford thought going after the “sports car crowd” was such a good idea. Robert S. McNamara was one.

This page, below: Two mid-1955 rear-end workouts for the proposed '58 two-seat continuation, done in clay (painted at right) on a production car. Bottom: Four-door T-Bird progressed as far as this late-1955 full-scale clay, but wasn't seriously considered. Opposite page, clockwise from bottom right: A late two-seat clay with near-final production four-seat styling; note hood scoop and different bodyside treatment on this late four-seat mockup; an earlier, busier trial; Troof hardtop was proposed as the only '58 body style as late as early 1957.

was followed by the Lincoln XL-500, Mercury XM-800, and Ford Mystere show cars of 1953-55, all extensions of the personal-luxury format that would ultimately be realized in the production four-seat Thunderbird.

Meanwhile, Ford was preparing its reply to Chevrolet's Corvette, the GM Motorama sports car concept first shown in early 1953 and put into limited production later that year. Introduced in late 1954, the two-seat Thunderbird was more *boulevardier* than pure sports car and more civilized than Corvette. It had a steel instead of fiberglass body, expected amenities like roll-up windows instead of drafty side curtains, and a standard V-8 instead of a six for superior straightline performance. It was a winning formula: Ford's new “personal” car trounced its Chevy rival in 1955 model year sales by better than 20 to 1, and quickly gained a wide following for its suave good looks and glamorous image. But even as it took

flight, the two-seat Bird was an endangered species.

Enthusiasts are prone to forget that car companies are in business mainly to make a profit, not necessarily “great cars,” though the two do often go together. It's important to remember that, from the beginning, the Thunderbird was an untried concept and thus quite scary for Ford in the mid-Fifties. Here was a specialty car aimed at a market segment known to be very narrow—and with hazy prospects for the future. The decision to go after the “sports car crowd” stemmed partly from the company's desire in those days to compete with GM model for model, and it had the wholehearted backing of Ford Division general manager Lewis D. Crusoe. But not everyone thought it was a good idea. Recalls longtime Thunderbird stylist Bill Boyer: “It was such a risky venture. The success of that vehicle wasn't guaranteed at all. [It seemed especially] risky for those

