

# presidential cars

**P**residents are just like you and me, they put their pants on one leg at a time. Only with a Secret Service detail carefully watching on. And even though such tight security typically precludes the leader of the free world from driving himself around, U.S. presidents — like the country they lead — are inextricably linked with the automobile.

## Disappointing inauguration

The Trump inauguration was supposed to be the maiden voyage of the next generation of presidential parade cars. Instead, The Donald had to ride in the same model that served President Obama. That General Motors-made limo (right) is a Cadillac Frankenstein of truck platform, Caddie body and Escalade trim. (Optioned up with body armor and tear gas canon.) The new breed of Cadillac One will debut in another month or so, sporting a CTS-like grille and non-wreath Caddie badge. And it will be the best. Everyone agrees.

## Bubble boy

President Harry Truman allegedly had a grudge against GM products, so he rode around in a Ford-made **1950 Lincoln Cosmopolitan** convertible. Not wanting to disappoint the crowds during a rainstorm when the top was up, however, President Dwight Eisenhower had a plexi-glas canopy installed so people could see him. The so-called “Bubbletop” limo remained in service until 1965, and now resides in the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan.



WWLD? What would **Lincoln** drive? We’re suggesting a **2016 Lincoln MKS**, manufactured in Illinois, right at Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant. For the lanky 16th president, the full-size luxury sedan offers 39.9 inches of head room and four-score 2.8 inches of front leg room.



Alternative fuel cars are nothing new. Nearly a century before Tesla — and while Nicola Tesla was still alive — this zero-emission **Baker Eddy** all-electric was used by William Howard Taft (1909-1913). Its 72-volt motor was powered by six 12-volt batteries, it didn’t require cranking to start, and the power train was virtually maintenance-free. Taft also owned a sustainable-fuel **1909 Model M White Steamer**. In fact, the first president to ever ride in a car, William McKinley, took a jaunt in a **Stanley Steamer**. Even into the 1950s, Dwight Eisenhower still drove the **1914 Rauch and Lang** electric that belonged to his parents.

## The import file

**CLASSIFIED**



**Ronald Reagan’s guilty secret:** At the height of the anti-Japanese import craze, he drove a **Subaru Brat** around his Santa Barbara ranch.



**Lyndon Baines Johnson** was best known for his black, custom stretch Lincoln Continental limo, but the Texan also owned a German-made **1962 Amphicar**. With unwitting passengers on board, the jokester president would pretend that he’d taken a wrong turn toward the lake and... Splash! You had to be there.



## TEST DRIVE

# 2017 Kia Niro

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Niro rolls on a dedicated front-wheel-drive platform. The absence of an AWD option isn’t unusual for a hybrid, but it is for a crossover.

Niro has a toe in both pools, so this may work against the Kia in northern tier states where that commodity carries more weight with consumers. Niro’s chassis was purpose-built for its hybrid powertrain; over half consists of high strength steel. The fully independent suspension is fitted with MacPherson struts up front and a multilink setup in back. The crossover’s center of gravity finds a nice middle ground; low enough to have confident, car-like handling; high enough for easy ingress/egress.

Ride quality is comfortable; coarse pavement creates road noise in the cabin. Part of a hybrid’s energy is derived from regenerative braking, but the process often brings with it the side effect of a

mushy brake pedal. Not so here; the Kia’s brake pedal feel is noticeably firmer than the average hybrid.

Cargo capacity is 19.4 cubic-feet with the back seat upright. The second row seatbacks fold forward to a flat load floor, and doing so bumps storage space to 54.5 cu.-ft. Lift over height to access your gear is low. There’s hidden storage below the deck, and a pull-out cargo cover is standard on EX level and up, to shield what’s above deck from inquiring eyes. For the sake of comparison, storage space in hybrids like the Ford C Max measures 24.5-52.6 cu.-ft., Honda HRV is 23.2 and the Toyota Prius is 24.6. Hybrid crossovers like the Toyota RAV4 hybrid measure out at 35.6-70.6 cu.-ft., while the Subaru Crosstrek Hybrid is 21.5-50.2, and the Nissan Rogue Hybrid checks in with 27.3-61.4. The front seats are based on those found in the Kia Optima. The seats and headrests are quite comfortable, with a profile that supports both back and head.



Kia’s Niro comes equipped with UV03, Kia’s latest infotainment system that includes Android Auto and Apple CarPlay. The 7-inch touchscreen (8-inch on Touring and Touring Launch) can be used to access music, voice calls, navigation and telematics services.

Touring models get a heated steering wheel and front seats (the latter with ventilation); the driver’s side is 10-way power adjustable with lumbar control on Touring/Touring Launch models. Front leg room measures 41.7 inches (more than Crosstrek and HRV, less than C-Max, Prius, RAV4 or Rogue), while rear leg room is 37.4 inches (more than C Max, RAV4, Crosstrek and Prius; less than Rogue and HRV). I’m 6’1” and I found the front space more than enough for me, which is a surprise in a car this size. With row one set to suit me, I had just enough room to fit in back — snugly. Niro is equipped with the latest edition of Kia’s infotainment and telematics system. UV03 includes Android Auto and Apple CarPlay smartphone integration. The 7-inch capacitive touchscreen (8-inch on Touring and Touring Launch) can be used to access music, messaging, navigation, voice calls and vehicle telematics services. An ear-pleasing, 315 watt harmon-kardon sound system

is included on the top two trims. The 8-speaker system includes Clari-Fi music restoration technology. Five trim levels are offered: FE (MSRP \$22,890), LX(\$23,200), EX (\$25,700), Launch Edition (\$28,000) and Touring (\$29,650). A long list of technology is available via trim level upgrades or option bundles. One of them — the Advanced Technology package (\$1,900) — was included on my Touring test car. This bundle added smart cruise control, front collision warning, lane departure warning, autonomous emergency braking, HID headlights and a wireless phone charger. While currently a family of one, siblings for Niro are said to be in the offing. The hybrid is will be joined by a plug-in version this fall, with a full electric rumored to follow at a later date.

A regular contributor to the Times Union for more than 25 years, Dan Lyons is the award-winning author of six books, and photographer of 180 calendars.



Don’t miss next week’s Test Drive:  
**2017 Volkswagen Passat**

