CAR and DRIVER

JULY 1968 / 60 CENTS

Tests: Empi VW • Saab Sonett • Austin America

Will de Gaulle Conquer the Racing World?

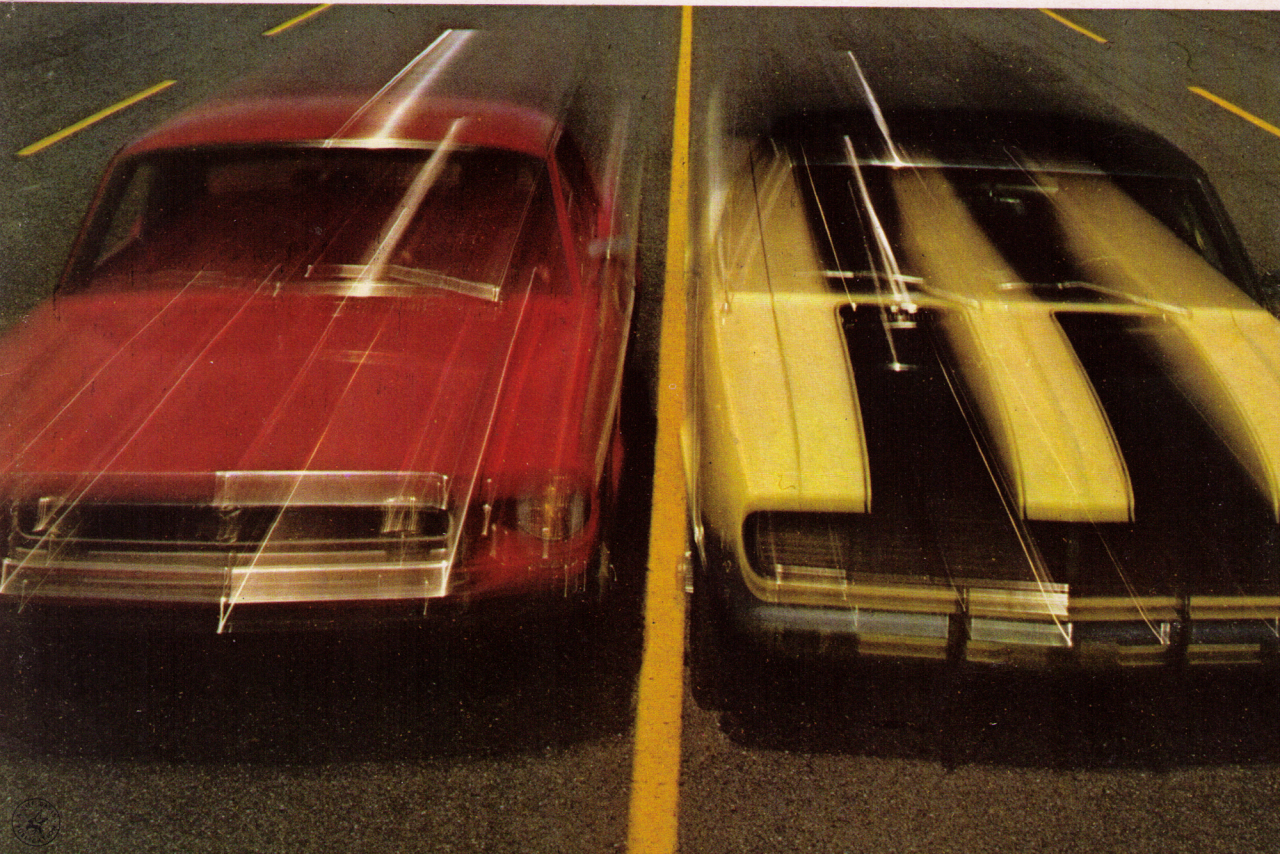
Cousin of Boss Wagon

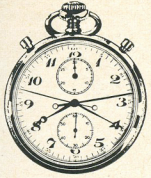
Who Reports on Consumer Reports?

Super Test:

TRANS-AM RACERS FOR THE ROAD

Tunnel Port Mustang vs. Z/28 Camaro

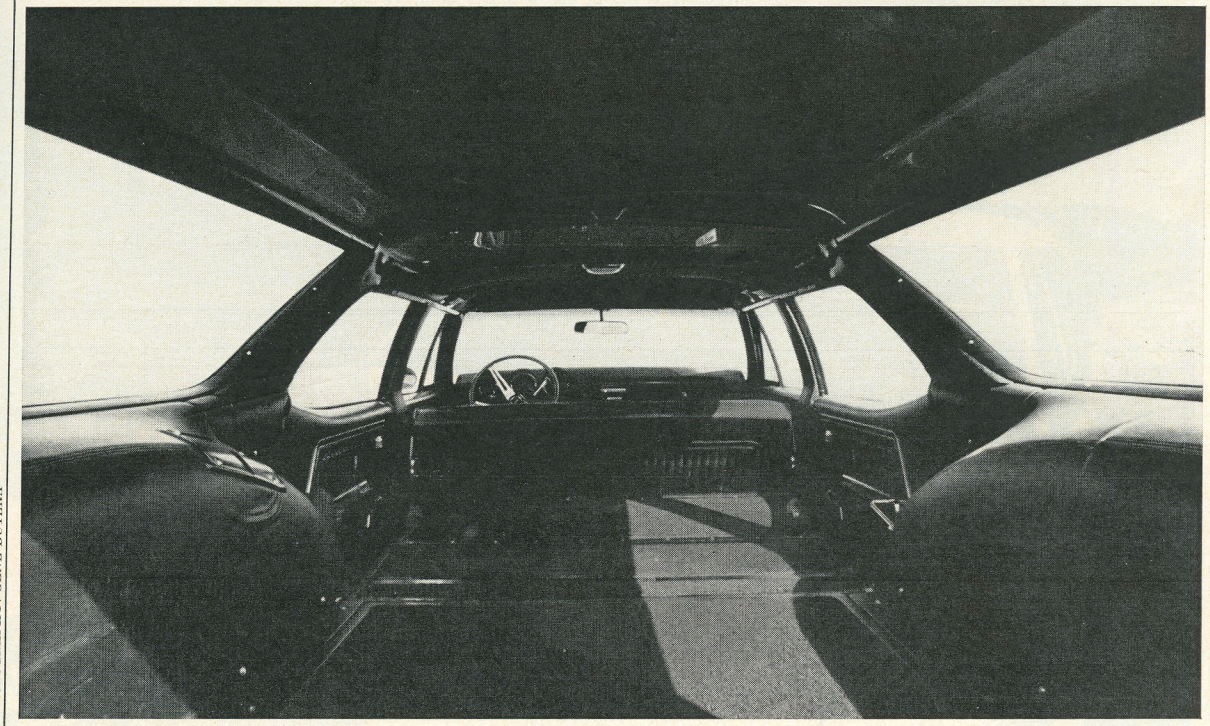




PROJECT CAR: CAR and DRIVER ROAD TEST

Olds Vista-Cruiser 455

The Cousin of Boss Wagon proves to be a bit more boss than wagon.



PHOTOGRAPHY: GENE BUTERA

The original Boss Wagon—the 1966 Plymouth Fury III so much beloved of *Car and Driver*—has now seen its second birthday and is about to come face to face with its fifty-thousandth mile. Both the concept and the vehicle have worn extremely well, so well in fact that we decided to do another one.

This time we selected an Olds F-85 Vista-Cruiser, largely because several engineers whose opinions we trust have called it the best-handling and most stable of all of the current crop of station wagons, and because Oldsmobile Division has been showing such extraordinary signs of life in the areas of enthusiasm and high performance. The Olds—albeit strictly a one-off custom job—is a worthy successor to our aging Plymouth, and if it is a bit more boss than wagon, we can only defend it on the grounds that we are car nuts, not teamsters.

In the Wagon Department the Olds loses to the Plymouth. It is just as long and just as heavy, but much narrower inside and out, making it considerably tighter and more limited for both people and cargo. In fact, its smaller interior dimensions are the *only* feature of the entire package that qualify it as the intermediate-sized car its F-85 nameplate implies. It is a great big car, friends, make no mistake.

It is in the Boss Department, however, that the Olds excels our Plymouth and just about anything else we can think of. It is a veritable bear. It goes, stops, steers, and handles like hell. It is so fast you wouldn't believe it. It does a big 94 in the quarter-mile, with an ET of 14.7 seconds, but unlike so many cars that deliver lots of *sturm und drang* in the quarter, it is perfectly happy to turn a corner or stop at the end.

New York National Speedway, where we conducted our performance tests, features a 0.5 mile shutdown area and a short return loop that can be negotiated at about 55 mph by test drivers with more *brio* than brains. The Olds was so good going through the quarter, then being hurled through the return loop that followed, that we'd like to see the whole procedure added to drag racing programs as a special event. The funny cars might end up a little less funny as a result.

To say that our Olds wagon was nonstandard would be an understatement of massive proportions. Basically a double-domed Vista-Cruiser, its standard-equipment 350 cu. in. V-8 was replaced with a mighty giant of a ram-air 455 developing tons of torque and herds of horsepower. And the enthusiasts in Lansing weren't content to substitute just any old 455, they went a step farther and breathed all over the thing, bolting on a set of 4-4-2 heads, a special capacitor discharge system, and the camshaft from their hottest '67 4-4-2 option. The result was the strongest, most responsive powerplant of any we've driven

(continued)

Anybody who ever criticized American cars—particularly station wagons—should try this Oldsmobile. With its voluptuous bodywork, trick roof, enormous engine, it is purely American, but its behavior on the road is enough to make converts of us all.





in the seven-liter-plus category.

Big engines are usually thundering torquers, but shy on the zappy responsiveness of small-displacement screamers. The 455 combined the best of both worlds—bags of torque, but very sporty at the same time. It normally only wound to about 5400, but if it had turned any higher than that it would undoubtedly have detached our retinas. What's a big engine for? Retina Detaching is a mere hazard of the trade. Besides which, it's worth it when you come across something as close to Truth as Boss Wagon's Cousin.

Bolted to this superstrong engine was a pumped-up 3-speed Turbo Hydra-Matic that shifted more crisply and authoritatively than most manual boxes. Only when it got hot from repeated acceleration tests and a lot of forced manual upshifts did it lose some of its sharp punch, and then only between second and third. The final-drive ratio (with limited-slip) was the optional 3.42 instead of the standard Vista-Cruiser's 2.78, and it ran on Olds' beautiful styled steel wheels (from Motor Wheel Corp.) with 6.0-in. rims and Goodyear H70-14 Polyglas tires.

The front suspension is part of Oldsmobile's police "Apprehender" package, as is the rear, only the front is pretty straight while the rear bristles with evidence of the same special attention that the engine got. The front's made up of stiffer springs and shocks and a stabilizer bar. The rear has stiffer shocks and springs, plus the control arms and rear stabilizer bar from the 4-4-2. Brakes are disc front/drum rear, again of the police "Apprehender" (not to be confused with "Apprehensive') *genre.*

You want to know something, sports fans? It *oversteered.* You got that? We were not terribly surprised to find that it went around corners well, considering all the trouble those cats in Lansing went to to fix it up, but we were distinctly astonished to find that it wanted to go around with its tail hung out and the steering steady on neutral. It was incredible. Fly down the road at all those miles per hour, pitch the big mother at a corner, the tail comes out a predictable yard or so, you correct a smidgeon (returning the steering to dead center), and the Oldsmobile flies through the corner at a horrendous rate, solid as a rock and safe as a house.

All it needed to be perfect were Koni shock absorbers, as fitted to the Plymouth Boss Wagon. The Oldsmobile shocks were fairly effective on smooth surfaces, but they didn't like rough ones much. Quite a bit of thump and bang from the bumps and expansion strips was transmitted to the main structure, and hard maneuvering on an uneven road resulted in too much fore-and-aft porpoising, and lateral wallow. A set of Konis would be just the ticket to stop all that waste motion and turn the Olds into the best American all-round, over-the-road car we'd ever driven.

Anybody who ever criticized American cars' handling should try this Oldsmobile. With its voluptuous bodywork, trick Super Chief roof, enormous engine, and great overall size and bulk, it is as purely American as any car could be, but its behavior on the road is so impeccable that it's a machine to make converts of us all. By the same token, anybody who ever defended typical American car handling as "good enough" ought to take our Oldsmobile home tonight.

The prevailing attitude in Detroit is that we don't "need" perfect handling, or ultimate braking power, or surgically precise steering. The Motor City hasn't stinted where raw torque and power and cubic inches are concerned, largely because of the parallel demands of NASCAR, NHRA, and the street racers, but we "balanced performance" enthusiasts haven't really managed to make ourselves heard yet. This Oldsmobile—though practically custom made for our test—is the kind of high-performance car Detroit should be selling across the board. Its brakes, steering and suspension are quite equal to the performance of the engine and, as a result, the car is an utter delight to drive—whether you're blowing off some twit's Mustang on your way home at night, or driving your kids to Sunday School.

Settling yourself in the driver's seat of the Cousin of Boss Wagon, you're immediately aware of its relatively small interior space. There's no feeling of unlimited hip and shoulder room in both front and rear seats, and the small doors, wide windshield and door posts, and black headliner all contribute to a feeling of constriction. The windows and windshield are sort of narrow—like gun-slits—and heavily tinted, a boon in a bright New Mexico summer but not too much in the yellow-gray of megalopolis smog. Visibility is only fair, in direct opposition to our Plymouth, which is light and airy, with excellent views in all directions. Like we said before, the Olds is a bit more Boss than Wagon.

The seats are not as comfortable as we'd like them to be either. The angle of the backs to the seat cushions was a little too sharp, resulting in minor discomfort at the base of the spine on long hauls, and the seat

(Text continued on page 92; Specifications overleaf)

OLDSMOBILE VISTA-CRUISER 455

Manufacturer: Oldsmobile Division
General Motors Corporation
Lansing, Michigan 48921

Number of dealers in U.S.: 3392

Vehicle type: Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 2-seat station wagon

Price as tested: $ N.A.
(Manufacturer's suggested retail price, including all options listed below, Federal excise tax, dealer preparation and delivery charges; does not include state and local taxes, license or freight charges)

Options on test car: Radio, force-air induction, H70x14 polyglas Goodyear tires, styled wheels, HD disc brakes, Police Apprehender suspension, 4-4-2 rear anti-sway bar, special engine, automatic transmission, limited-slip differential

ENGINE

Type: water-cooled V-8, cast iron block and heads, 5 main bearings
Bore x stroke..4.12 x 4.25 in, 104.8 x 106.9 mm
Displacement..455 cu in, 7450 cc
Compression ratio..10.5 to one
Carburetion..1 x 4-bbl Rochester Quadrajet
Valve gear..pushrod-operated overhead valves
Power (SAE)..390 bhp @ 5000 rpm
Torque (SAE)..500 lbs/ft @ 3600 rpm
Specific power output..0.86 bhp/cu in, 53.4 bhp/liter
Max. recommended engine speed..6000 rpm

DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission..3-speed automatic
Max. torque converter ratio..2.3 to one
Final drive ratio..3.42 to one

Gear	Ratio	Mph/1000 rpm	Max. test speed
I	2.48	9.3	51 mph (5500 rpm)
II	1.48	15.6	86 mph (5500 rpm)
III	1.00	23.0	127 mph (5500 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase..121.0 in
Track..F: 59.0 in, R: 59.0 in
Length..217.5 in
Width..76.7 in
Height..56.8 in
Ground clearance..6.2 in
Curb weight..4380 lbs
Test weight..4530 lbs
Weight distribution, F/R..50.7/49.3%
Lbs/bhp (test weight)..11.6
Battery capacity..12 volts, 61 amp/hr
Alternator capacity..444 watts
Fuel capacity..20 gal
Oil Capacity..4.0 qts
Water capacity..15.2 qts

SUSPENSION

F: Ind., unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-sway bar
R: Rigid axle, trailing arms, coil springs, anti-sway bar

STEERING

Type..Recirculating ball, power assisted
Turns lock-to-lock..4.3
Turning circle..41.7 ft

BRAKES

F:..11.0-inch vented disc, power assisted
R:..9.5 x 2.5-inch cast iron drum, power assisted
Swept area..348.4 sq in

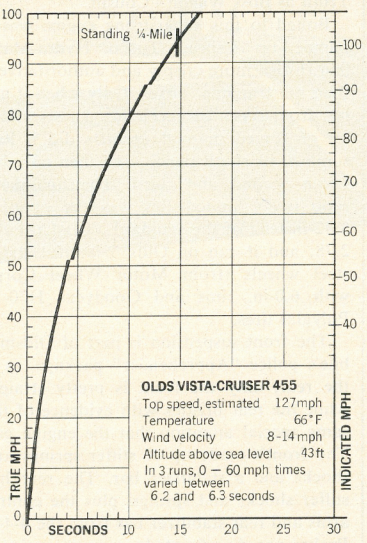
WHEELS AND TIRES

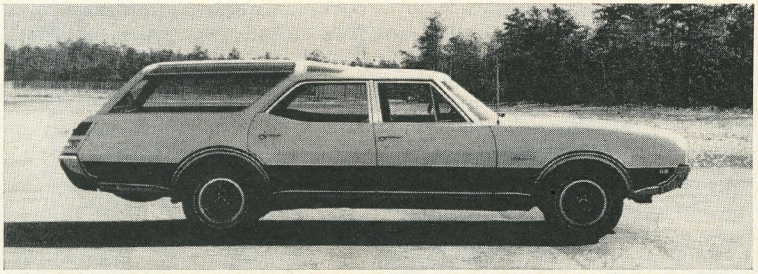
Wheel size and type..14 x 6-in, styled stamped steel, 5-bolt
Tire make, size and type..Goodyear H70 x 14, polyglas, tubeless
Test inflation pressures..F: 24 psi, R: 32 psi
Tire load rating..1510 lbs per tire @ 24 psi

PERFORMANCE

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	2.0
40 mph	2.9
50 mph	4.5
60 mph	6.2
70 mph	8.2
80 mph	10.5
90 mph	13.6
100 mph	16.8

Standing ¼-mile..14.7 sec @ 93.6 mph
80-0 mph panic stop..237 ft (.90 G)
Fuel mileage..10-14 mpg on premium fuel
Cruising range..200-280 mi









CHECK LIST

ENGINE

Starting..Very Good
Response..Very Good
Vibration..Very Good
Noise..Very Good

DRIVE TRAIN

Shift linkage..Good
Shift smoothness..Very Good
Drive train noise..Very Good

STEERING

Effort..Good
Response..Fair
Road feel..Good
Kickback..Very Good

SUSPENSION

Ride comfort..Very Good
Roll resistance..Good
Brake dive..Good
Harshness control..Good

HANDLING

Directional control..Good
Predictability..Good
Evasive maneuverability..Good
Resistance to sidewinds..Excellent

BRAKES

Pedal pressure..Good
Response..Fair
Fade resistance..Very Good
Directional stability..Very Good

CONTROLS

Wheel position..Very Good
Pedal position..Very Good
Gearshift position..Fair
Relationship..Good
Small controls..Fair

INTERIOR

Ease of entry/exit..Good
Noise level (cruising)..Very Good
Front seating comfort..Very Good
Front leg room..Very Good
Front head room..Fair
Front hip/shoulder room..Fair
Rear seating comfort..Fair
Rear leg room..Fair
Rear head room..Fair
Rear hip/shoulder room..Fair
Instrument comprehensiveness..Very Good
Instrument legibility..Fair

VISION

Forward..Good
Front quarter..Poor
Side..Good
Rear quarter..Very Good
Rear..Very Good

WEATHER PROTECTION

Heater/defroster..Excellent
Ventilation..Very Good
Weather sealing..Very Good

CONSTRUCTION QUALITY

Sheet metal..Good
Paint..Fair
Chrome..Very Good
Upholstery..Very Good
Padding..Very Good
Hardware..Very Good

GENERAL

Parking and signal lights..Very Good
Wiper effectiveness..Good
Service accessibility..Good
Interior storage space..Fair
Bumper protection..Fair



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OLDS VISTA-CRUISER 455

(Continued from page 61)

cushions themselves are not deep enough to give adequate support to the upper leg.

"Dark" really is the word for the Olds' interior. Everything inside from seats, to rugs, to dashboard, to door padding was done in ebony with just an occasional glimmer of chrome to break up the monotony and help you find things like the keyhole. Man, it's black in there, and, big as the car is, it reminded you of sitting in a Porsche Speedster with the top up. All of which lends a feeling of sinister invincibility as you sit in that luxuriously-appointed mobile pillbox just waiting for some stroke to come along in his production street racer so you can send him skulking back to his dealer with the sad news that he's just been blown out of the tub by a *station wagon.*

Obviously, the Olds engineers couldn't leave the dashboard alone on our wagon with all that other stuff going on. When we took delivery of the original Boss Wagon the interior was stock as a stove, in fact no one had even seen fit to install a tach. Not so with this second generation wagon. For starters, there's a 7000 rpm tach sunk in the rightmost of three instrument wells in front of the driver. It's very nice, but it sure would be a bit nicer if you could read the thing. Just cruising along it presents no problem and it's visible as hell—just in case you're curious as to what rpm you're turning as you hum along the expressway at a steady 65. But when you're really in need, like when you're shifting manually, the tach is partially hidden behind your right hand and after about 3000 rpm you have to rely on sound and feel—unless you happen to be Clark Kent and can see through the back of your hand.

Our super trick Olds Vista-Cruiser also had a 120 mph "Certified Police Speedometer" staring at us from the middle pod. Exactly what it was certified for isn't clear because if that little dude is the thing the fuzz use we're all in trouble. At an actual 56 mph our efficient-looking and official police speedometer was indicating 60 and when it showed 100 the actual speed was only 93 mph. A phone call to Lansing solved the problem. In their zeal to provide us with the ultimate station wagon, the Oldsmobile engineers had stuffed in a speedometer that had been calibrated for a car with smaller wheels. A few days after the wagon appeared, Olds sent us another speedometer that proved to be dead on.

We've told you that in terms of roominess and payload capacity the standard General Motors short wheelbase station wagon doesn't match the competitor from Chrysler—and the reason is largely a result of its narrower width (76.7 in. for the Olds compared to 78.2 in. for the Plymouth), but it's all compounded by a styling gimmick. When viewed from the rear the sloping sides of an Olds Vista-Cruiser make it look like the Pyramid of Cheops with a picture window. Contrasted to the slab sides of the original Boss Wagon it isn't hard to see where all the insides went.

But in every other department the Cousin of Boss Wagon is comparable or better. In performance the Olds obviously *should* have the edge with its 455 cu. in. engine matched up against the Boss Wagon's comparatively puny 383, and this proved to be true. The Olds was 2.4 seconds quicker through the quarter (14.7 to 17.1 seconds) with a terminal velocity 10.1 mph faster (93.6 to 83.5 mph). Obviously, unless the Olds driver gets caught napping at the lights, there's no way he's going to lose.

The result of getting off the drag strip and onto twisting secondary roads for an imaginary road race would depend to a greater degree on driver skill and preference. Like we said earlier, the Olds has a characteristic oversteer while the Plymouth, like most station wagons, comes with a fairly heavy dose of understeer—making it easier for average ability drivers to handle. In addition, the Olds came with H-profile Polyglas tires. Very wide and just great, giving good bite off the line and surefootedness around the corners. Unfortunately they were too wide for the car. The first time we went around the handling loop at the end of New York National Speedway we thought the rear axle had broken off. There was a succession of thuds and godawful grinding noises that you wouldn't believe. Even with all those anti-sway bars holding things up from underneath, the Vista-Cruiser's bodywork leaned enough in hard cornering to bring the rear wheel housings in firm—very firm—contact with the wide tires. After a few more runs we were able to verify that was the case when a patch of polished sheetmetal showed up each rear wheelwell where the tires had scraped off all the undercoating.

Never mind all that you guys. It's happened. The company that has brought you all those Dumbdumb 88s, and those creaking Youngmobiles, has made a complete turnaround. Or at least it's obvious that there is an underground of Young Turks in the Division that *wants* it to make a complete turnaround. The Cousin of Boss Wagon is a first step. It's the wildest wagon we've ever driven. It's what every suburban commuter who has been bullied and cajoled and browbeaten by his wife into buying a wagon should have. The lady of the house can cruise to the hairdresser on weekdays while you're taking the train—but on the weekends, on the weekends you can lay a gate job on everybody in the block. And you can whistle through back roads behind those Porsche Speedsters on the way to Lime Rock or Willow Springs and not give an inch.

Oldsmobile isn't even that far from building a cousin to our cousin. By the time you read this they should have announced a limited edition of Hurst 4-4-2s, and with a little browbeating and cajoling on your part. . . ●