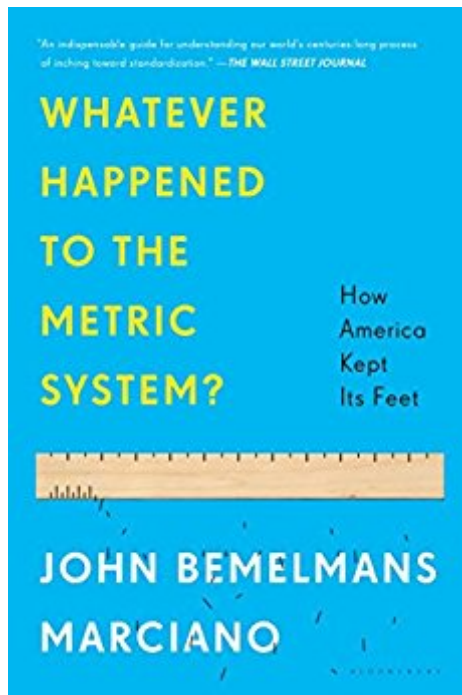


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Whatever Happened To The Metric System?: How America Kept Its Feet



Synopsis

The intriguing tale of why the United States has never adopted the metric system, and what that says about us. The American standard system of measurement is a unique and odd thing to behold with its esoteric, inconsistent standards: twelve inches in a foot, three feet in a yard, sixteen ounces in a pound, one hundred pennies to the dollar. For something as elemental as counting and estimating the world around us, it seems like a confusing tool to use. So how did we end up with it? Most of the rest of the world is on the metric system, and for a time in the 1970s America appeared ready to make the switch. Yet it never happened, and the reasons for that get to the root of who we think we are, just as the measurements are woven into the ways we think. John Marciano chronicles the origins of measurement systems, the kaleidoscopic array of standards throughout Europe and the thirteen American colonies, the combination of intellect and circumstance that resulted in the metric system's creation in France in the wake of the French Revolution, and America's stubborn adherence to the hybrid United States Customary System ever since. As much as it is a tale of quarters and tenths, it is a human drama, replete with great inventors, visionary presidents, obsessive activists, and science-loving technocrats. Anyone who reads this inquisitive, engaging story will never read Robert Frost's line "miles to go before I sleep" or eat a foot-long sub again without wondering, Whatever happened to the metric system?

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Customer Reviews

The average American probably thinks in terms of the metric system only when talking about guns (9 mm. Glock, 105 mm cannon), drugs (81 mg baby aspirin, 10 kilo of marijuana seized by cops), booze (75 cl bottles of wine, 1.75 cl bottles of whiskey or vodka) and every four years, the Olympics (all those swimming and field events in meters and kilometers). And he or she never notices that the weights of contents of a can or package in the supermarket are marked in grams as well as ounces, thanks to a 1994 law mandating dual labeling. And nobody seems to remember the 1970s drive to convert America to the metric system, one of the few remainders of which are mileage signs in kilometers in some states bordering Canada, to welcome Canadian tourists and to show we love them. John Bemelmans Marciano tells the fascinating story of America's long history of efforts to get this country to simplify its standards of measurement, get them in line with those of France, an early standards world power, and finally to attempt to adopt the metric system wholeheartedly, as most of the rest of the world has done. It's a long history, going back to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Quincy Adams, all early proponents of using decimals, initially applied to coinage. On the 200th anniversary of the United States, President Ford signed the Metric Conversion Act of 1975 to establish "a national policy of coordinating and planning for the increased use of the metric measurement system in the United States." Ronald Reagan killed that Board in 1982, and it disappeared without a whimper. So we still use ounces and inches, pounds and yards, gallons and acres, you name it. But at least the dollar had been divided into 100 cents in the 1800s.

I suspect that most people wouldn't be interested in the history of a system of measurement. For those who are, John Bemelmans Marciano's book may be interesting. Marciano actually covers more than the metric system, as measures of time, calendar systems, and especially currency are also discussed. Currency historically had a direct connection to measures of weight, as ideally a pile of silver coins weighing one pound should also be worth one pound in a monetary sense. This connection generally was obscured in practice, as governments reduced the precious metal content of coins or as the coins were clipped by counterfeiters. Currency also formerly encapsulated the historically preferred mathematical relationship between different units, with units that could be

readily divided not just in half but also by quarters or thirds without remainder were preferred. For example, before it was reformed in 1971, the British pound was divided into 20 shillings, each shilling worth 12 pence. Historically in the western world most people's math skills were limited to doubling numbers, or repeatedly dividing them in half. Hence the popularity of units like a pound (mass) divisible into 16 ounces, or an foot divided into 12 inches. The metric system, devised in France in the 1790s during that country's great revolution, changed all that, using units that differed by powers of 10, such as 1000 grams in a kilogram. It also created a connection between different kinds of units, such as between volume and weight - a gram was supposed to be the weight of one cubic centimeter of water at the temperature at which liquid water was most dense.

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