



THE UNITED STATES AND THE METRIC SYSTEM

A Capsule History

The United States is the only industrialized country in the world not officially using the metric system. Because of its many advantages (e.g., easy conversion between units of the same quantity), the metric system has become the internationally accepted system of measurement units.

Most Americans think that our involvement with metric measurement is relatively new. In fact, the United States' increasing use of metric units has been underway for many years, and the pace has accelerated in the past two decades. In the early 1800's the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey (the government's surveying and map-making agency) used meter and kilogram standards brought from France. In 1866 Congress authorized the use of the metric system in this country and supplied each state with a set of standard metric weights and measures.

In 1875, the United States reinforced its participation in the development of the internationally recognized metric system by becoming one of the original seventeen signatory nations to the **Treaty of the Meter**. This agreement established the *International Bureau of Weights and Measures (BIPM)* in Sèvres, France, to provide standards of measurement for worldwide use.

In 1893, the metric measurement standards, resulting from international cooperation under the auspices of BIPM, were adopted as the fundamental standards for length and mass in the United States. Our "customary" measurements – the foot, pound, quart, etc., – have been defined in

relation to the meter and the kilogram ever since.

In 1960, the *General Conference of Weights and Measures*, the governing body that has overall responsibility for the metric system, and which is made-up of signatory nations to the **Treaty of the Meter**, approved a modernized version of the metric system. The "modernized" system is called **Le Système International d'Unités** or the International System of Units, abbreviated SI.

In 1965, Great Britain, as a condition for becoming a member of the European Common Market, began a transition to the metric system in its trade and commerce. The conversion of England and the Commonwealth Nations to SI created a new sense of urgency regarding the use of metric units in the United States. Congress authorized a three-year study of this Nation's systems of measurement, with particular emphasis on the feasibility of adopting SI. Known as the "Metric Study Act of 1968," the study was conducted by the Department of Commerce. As part of the study, an advisory panel of 45 representatives consulted with and took testimony from hundreds of consumers, business organizations, labor groups, manufacturers, and state and local officials. The panel's report, "**A Metric America, A Decision Whose Time Has Come**," concluded that measurement in the United States was already based on metric units in many areas and that it was becoming more so every day. The majority of participants in the study believed that conversion to the metric system was in the best interests of

the Nation, particularly in view of the increasing importance and influence of technology in American life and our foreign trade.

The study recommended that the United States change to predominant use of the metric system over a ten-year period. Congress passed the **Metric Conversion Act** in 1975. The stated purpose of the Act was "to coordinate and plan the increasing use of the metric system in the United States." A process of voluntary conversion was initiated with the establishment of the U.S. Metric Board. The Board was charged with "devising and carrying out a broad program of planning, coordination, and public education, consistent with other national policy and interests, with the aim of implementing the policy set forth in this Act." However, the Act did not specify the ten-year conversion period recommended by the study. Further, much of the American public ignored the efforts of the Metric Board. In 1981, the Board reported to Congress that it lacked the necessary clear Congressional mandate to bring about National conversion to predominant use of metric measurements.

Because of the Board's apparent ineffectiveness and efforts to reduce Federal spending, it was disestablished in the fall of 1982.

The Board's demise increased doubts about the United States' commitment to metrication. Public and private sector metric transition slowed at the same time that the very reasons for the United States to adopt the metric system—the increasing competitiveness of other nations and the demands of global marketplaces—made completing United States metric conversion even more important.

Congress, recognizing the criticality of the United States' conformance with international standards for trade, included

new strong incentives for United States industrial metrication in the **Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988**. That legislation designated the metric system as the "preferred system of weights and measures for United States trade and commerce." It also required that all federal agencies use the metric system in their procurement, grants and other business-related activities by a "date certain and to the extent economically feasible, by the end of fiscal year 1992."

The Act's mandates are based on the conclusion that industrial and commercial productivity, effectiveness in mathematics and science education, and competitiveness of American products in world markets, will be enhanced by completing the change to the metric system of units. Failure to do so will increasingly handicap the Nation's industry and economy. The Federal Government's mandate is intended to encourage United States producers to develop their ability to provide goods and services expressed in metric units.

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- Which country is the only country in the industrialized world to not officially use the metric system?
- When was the metric system authorized for use in the United States?
- What did the “Treaty of the Meter” establish?
- What are “customary” units and how are they defined?
- What is the “modernized” system called and what is it abbreviated as?
- How did Great Britain revolutionize the use of the metric system?
- What was the “Metric Study Act of 1968” meant to determine?
- What did the panel’s report “A Metric America, A Decision Whose Time Has Come” conclude?
- What did the Metric Conversion Act promote?
- What did the board in 1981 find? What happened in 1982?
- What did the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988 require?
- Why is conversion to the metric system essential?

