

Metric Madness

World's system doesn't measure up to our own

Having been reared to expect flying cars and Teflon fashion-wear by 2000, I have to say I am disappointed that America still is struggling with the metric system.

Our national embarrassment over the 1999 loss of a very expensive Mars probe — attributed to an error in converting English measurements — should have told us what we have known for years: Metric must go.

Away. Back to France, where it began and where so many other exasperations seem to have a home.

The metric system just wasn't made for America. Elsewhere, it has been forced upon people too powerless or lazy to rebel against it. But we are a bottom-up society, used to doing things our own way. And metric isn't our way.

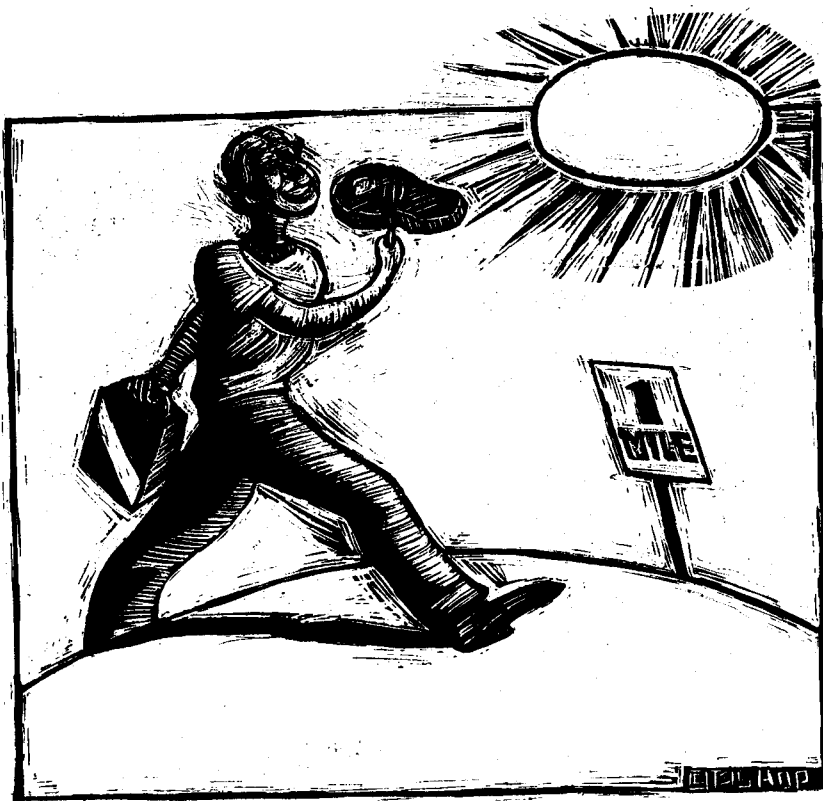
Now, it wouldn't be fair to chalk up the metric system's failure to simple, domestic reactionaries — though the authorities did push metric hardest in the oil-shocked 1970s, when everything imported had the same suspicious aroma as water fluoridation had in the McCarthy era. No, the real problem with metric is that it is a bad way of measuring things.

Metric units aren't people-based. Look at the very origin of the meter: A self-selected bunch of picture straighteners convened in France and estimated the distance from the equator to the North Pole — using 18th-century tools — and declared it the ideal starting point for a unit of measure. What were they thinking?

The meter simply is too big to size up anything shorter than Olympic records. Its volumetric derivative, the liter, is too small; it takes two of them just to package soft drinks. The same goes for other units. Outside of a laboratory or hospital, nobody cares about a gram or millimeter of anything, and the hectoliter has yet to stir anyone's passion. We don't like those units because our everyday needs



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Randy Mack Bishop/The Dallas Morning News

played no part in their creation.

I grudgingly will give the metric busybodies credit for a recent improvement: In 1983, the white-coats-on-high redefined the meter as the distance that light travels in a vacuum in 1/299,792,458 of a second — a welcome clarification. Apparently, the pole-to-equator measurement was shakier than first thought.

You know why the English system won't die? Because it is handy. If the king declared his thumb to be exactly one-inch wide, that was perfect; so were the thumbs of most of his subjects. His foot was ideal for gauging larger items, which is why people still conduct what appears to be a home sobriety test before heading off to the store for throw rugs. A pound is about how much steak I

could eat as a teenager, at least on a bet. And a mile is about as far as I care to walk with a gallon of gasoline.

(And, while we are discussing systems of measurement, let me just say the number 100 always alarms me, whether it is dollars due, years sentenced or degrees Fahrenheit. Conversely, I am not rattled at the prospect of 38 degrees Celsius, even though a day of it would finish me off and probably ruin my lawn.)

The U.S. government, unwilling to admit a mistake, has ordered its agencies to use metric — as if those agencies already weren't annoying enough to taxpayers. We conquered polio, built the Hoover Dam and stuck a flag in the moon with the English system operating in every corner of our country. I would think the French and others would want to learn from us. But they, and the

rest of Europe, keep insisting that we change.

Well, we brought them Kentucky Fried Chicken. We can bring them drums, too. At the dawn of the third millennium, we, the leaders of the free world, should enlighten and liberate our troubled neighbors through the export of our handy, built-from-the-bottom-up measuring system. There is nothing wrong with every merchant, engineer and consumer on the planet measuring stuff in convenient pounds, inches and gallons.

U.S. gallons, of course. Not those oddball Imperial gallons. I think we fought a war over that one.

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