



# Whatever Happened to the Metric System?: How America Kept Its Feet

John Bemelmans Marciano

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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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