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Metric Conversion Not 'Voluntary'

CONGRESS has committed at least three major errors regarding conversion of our weights and measures to the metric system.

The first was failure to adopt this system about 150 years ago when it began to spread around the world, after it was devised by the Paris Academy of Sciences. It was considered but turned down. Costs and confusion would have been less then.

The second major lapse of legislative responsibility occurred in 1875 when the United States was one of 17 nations which signed the Treaty of the Meter, adopting the system. Congress failed to enact laws to put it into effect, although an 1866 law had authorized it. Uncle Sam sat on a fence that could have been measured in either rods or meters.

The most recent mistake was enactment of a law to put the system into effect at a time when difficulties, expenses and public opinion make it extremely hard to accomplish. This law, signed by then-President Ford on Dec. 23, 1975,

declared that "the policy of the United States shall be to coordinate and plan the increasing use of the metric system."

It established a U.S. Metric Board to coordinate the "voluntary conversion." However voluntary it might be, federal agencies are issuing regulations that make change-over mandatory.

Section 8 of Article I of the U.S. Constitution says "The Congress shall have power to . . . fix the standard of weights and measures." Whatever is done, right or wrong, all are responsibilities of Congress. This includes bureau actions.

Right now, there may be no way of converting that would please a majority of the people. Some consider the movement to be subversively motivated. A few favor immediate mandatory changeover, while many are outspoken in opposition to the metric system.

Until new generations are brought up under metric education, Americans must operate under two different systems.

Scientists and pharmacists al-

ready have converted, while mechanics often are equipped with dual sets of wrenches so they may work on either American or foreign-built cars.

Track and field events and swimming pools are to be converted to metric measurements, but football fields are to continue to be 100 yards long.

Our cars have speedometers that show rate of speed and distances in miles. The Federal Highway Administration has drawn up regulations (apparently not voluntary) that highway signs will show speed limits only in metric terms by next year.

Critics have suggested that we might as well go metric on time also, making our present speed limit show something like 88.54 kilometers per deciday or millimonth.

Under the law, metric conversion is voluntary, but as bureaus issue regulations, it looks as though all will have to volunteer, regardless of our varying ability to "think metric."