

Friday, October 24, 2003

Measurement schizophrenia creates havoc

The 1990s were a good time for the nation's space program and, indeed, humanity's exploration of the cosmos. The space shuttle Endeavour left and returned on its maiden voyage (1992); the Galileo probe put newer technology to work (for the entire decade), letting humans remotely explore Jupiter and its moons in more scientific



Travis Willse
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depth than ever before; and the Hubble Space Telescope captured images of the farthest depths of the visible universe (1993, after repairs corrected for a so-called "spherical aberration" in the telescope's lens) as well as the first direct picture of a

planet outside our solar system (1998). Surely, all are magnificent achievements indicative of humanity's tireless curiosity and remarkable ingenuity.

In late 1998, NASA launched a satellite, the Mars Climate Orbiter (which was built in part by contractor Lockheed Martin Corp.). The probe was designed to collect information about the Red Planet's atmosphere, and to relay data from a parallel mission, the Mars Polar Lander. On Sept. 23, 1999, the Orbiter fired its engines and rocketed to within 60 kilometers of the planet's surface, fatally closer than planned. According to a NASA master catalog entry, the resulting friction and atmospheric stresses likely destroyed the \$125 million craft.

What caused such a grievous problem? Not the usual difficulties of engineering machines for (literally) out-of-this-world exploration, but an error of the sort we learn to avoid in elementary school: For a critical spacecraft operation, NASA used the metric unit for force (the newton), while Lockheed Martin used the English unit (the familiar pound). The bad number-crunching signaled the craft to misfire, sending a cool eighth of a billion dollars of taxpayer money careening toward the Martian surface, an ignominious counterpoint to years of general NASA successes.

While a later NASA inquiry cited problems with the project's validation — rather than a gross oversight on the part of Lockheed Martin engineers, the problem itself represents a subtle but bizarre schism in national policy.

Accordingly, the incident didn't reflect problems with the antiquated English measurement system itself but rather the sometimes gross inconvenience of using two systems. Using the English system alone, however, is almost as bad. The metric system is easier to remember, quicker to use and less prone to mistakes.

One of metric system's biggest obstacles in America has been a record of false starts. The Metric Conversion Act of 1975 established the Metric Board to encourage metrication and finally designated the system as the preferred one for American use. The board dissolved in 1982 because it lacked a real mandate.

The most important federal advance in implementing the system came a few years later, when Congress passed the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988, which directed all federal agencies to adopt the metric system by the end of 1992; the metrication of the federal government is now near-complete.

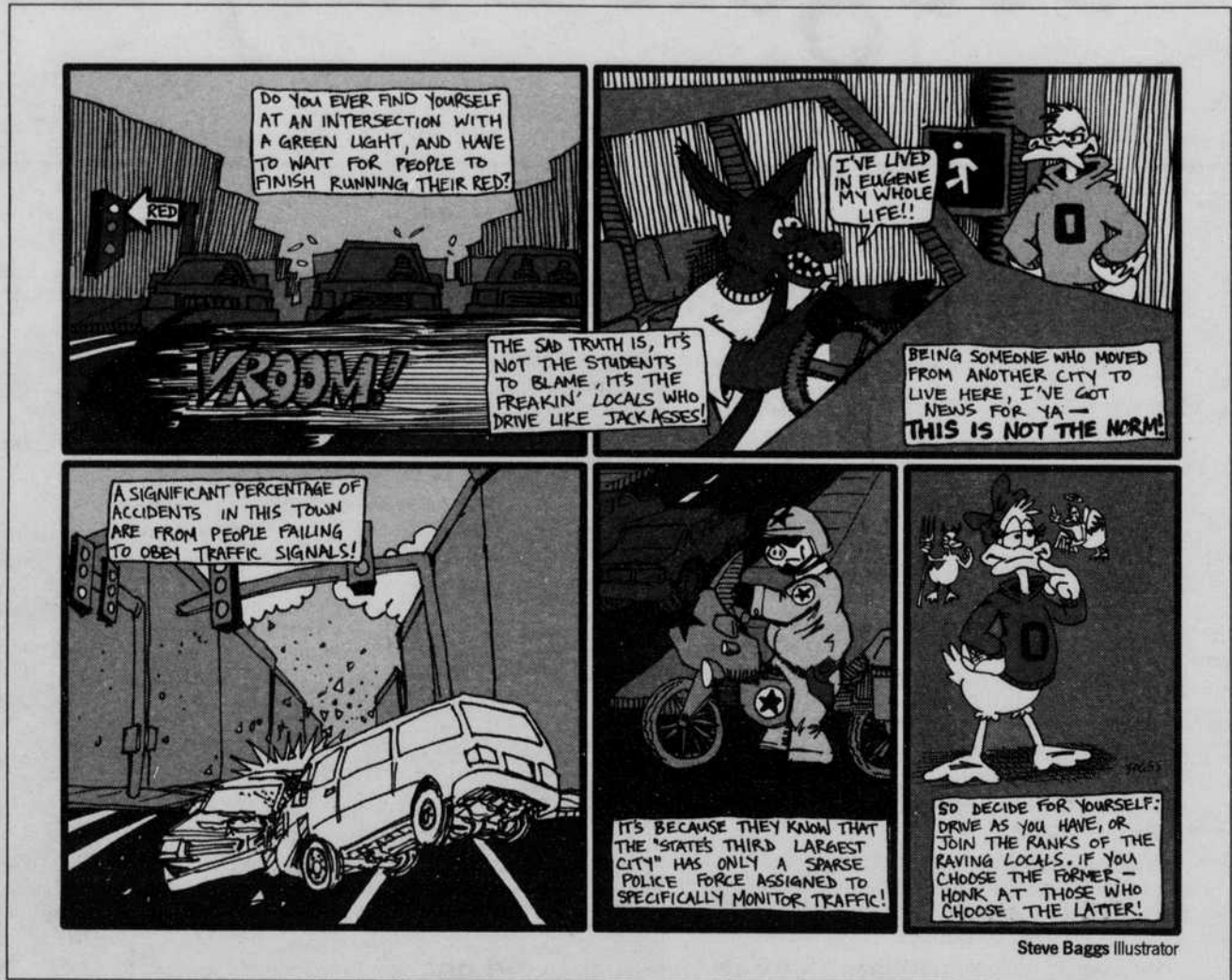
But, no thanks to more dilution of legislation and the dogged persistence of certain entrenched interests, the nation now sits in a sort of policy limbo.

A 1998 federal mandate originally required builders to use the metric system in all federally funded highway projects but eventually made compliance optional for state governments. More than 80 percent of the states were certified as "metric-ready," and were using metric units when building government buildings.

Since that participation became optional, however, suppliers and some contractors have pressured more than half of those states to return to the unwieldy English system, according to a Silicon Valley / San Jose Business Journal article. As of 2000, 14 state departments of transportation used the metric system, 28 used the English system and the last eight allow use of either system. The private sector lags much further behind in adoption. Clearly, the nation suffers from a peculiar measurement schizophrenia that's at best largely inconvenient.

Possibly the most compelling case for metrication is a simple what's-popular-is-what's-right argument. The only other nations still holding out with an archaic measurement system are Liberia and Myanmar; that means about 95 percent of the world's nations, by population, use the more convenient metric system. The benefits of streamlined international trade alone would be worth the switch; the ease of everyday calculations are icing on the metrical cake.

Contact the editorial editor at traviswillse@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.



Steve Baggs Illustration

Power structures cause injustice

Upon reading "Recognizing Patriotism" (ODE, Oct. 10), I felt immediately that I had to comment on behalf of the extreme left. Although Willse noted that he commented on a current within the left rather than the group in its entirety, he still paints an unfair characterization of our political ideologies.

Willse begins by arguing that many extreme leftists blame some or all Americans for the "past transgressions" of a select few.

This is simply not the case. The confusion lies in that when those on the extreme left say "America," they wish to convey a meaning different from the word as it is commonly understood. We view America not as a group of citizens residing on a particular land mass and sharing a particular cultural history, but as a particular set of socioeconomic institutions, the distilled expression of which being the activities of the federal government and capitalist class who wields it as a tool. When we blame America, we blame not America's average citizen. In fact, we do not even blame the corrupt individuals who wield power in our society.

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Rather, we blame the systemic tendencies of political and economic institutions that serve to cultivate artificial hierarchy and greed, and the corrupt lust for power within that hierarchy.

Willse goes on to argue that it is irrational for the American critic to argue against the sum activities of the U.S. government when it is through this government that we are granted numerous freedoms, including freedom of speech. He gives support, contending that the United States has one of the best human rights records among history's world powers, and he goes on to make a vague contrast between the American way of life and totalitarian repression: "Freedom is better than slavery, free speech is better than censorship, one debate is better than political imprisonment." Willse's argument is essentially a straw man. Granted, America may offer a greater degree of freedom than the array of nation-states with which Willse compares it, but the fact remains that history has shown us that the central tendency of any concentrated power is to lead to heinous abuse of that power; America remains corrupt. To make an analogy, one may prefer to have his or her arm broken rather than a giant rusty, barbed spike be

driven through his or her lower intestines, but neither situation is desirable.

Additionally, in this same line of reasoning, Willse succumbs to the common misconception that it is through hierarchical structures such as the state that we derive our freedom. Granted, nation-states may grant their citizens rights, but these rights are only necessary in the context of such hierarchical structures. For example, the right to freedom of speech is only necessary when hierarchical structures, be they government-repression or restricted media access due to monopolization of capital, prevent individuals from speaking freely. In other words, inalienable rights in the abstract are only useful to us when the ability to achieve welfare on one's own terms, to live freely in the concrete, has been stripped from us. In sum, we, the sociopolitical extremists of the left, oppose America not because of some history of sporadic evil-doing in the past, but because we can see that current injustices stem from systemic causes rooted in present power structures, and if these injustices are to be eliminated, so must these power structures as well.

Andy Kohlen is a senior studying psychology and sociology.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fraternities, sororities produce lifelong leaders

Brothers and sisters of the greek community, our secret is out. It was only a matter of time before someone realized that greek life produces leaders ("Greeks' ample student senate representation causes concern," ODE, Oct. 17). Before we know it, the independents are going to learn that greeks have produced 71 percent of those listed in "Who's Who in America," 85 percent of Fortune 500 executives, 40 of 47 U.S. Supreme Court justices since 1910, 76 percent of all U.S. congressmen and senators, all but two U.S. presidents and vice presidents who were born after the first social fraternity was founded in 1825, and 63 percent of

the U.S. president's Cabinet members since 1900. Then what? They learn that of the nation's 50 largest corporations, 43 are headed by fraternity men?

Take my word, I will do all I can to keep this information from getting out. We wouldn't want to "cause concern." I'll even try to reinforce the stereotypes people seem to feel comfortable with.

Now, who's gonna fill this keg cup?

John Ward
 senior
 chemistry

Lack of housing code 'unacceptable'

The sight of my fellow University students returning to campus reminds me of

Eugene's unacceptable lack of a housing code. Unlike most cities that harbor a high volume of renters, Eugene doesn't have a housing code that sets standards for the living spaces that community members rent.

The lack of a housing code results in two problems: Tenants are not made aware of their rights and landlords are not provided with a set of clear expectations regarding the services they are required to provide. In order to foster pride in our community and develop good relations between tenants and landlords, the Eugene City Council should take action to develop a housing code.

Tim Johnson
 chairman, OSPIRG
 University of Oregon chapter