



Why isn't the US metric?

Lightning Talk

NGAC meeting June 2014

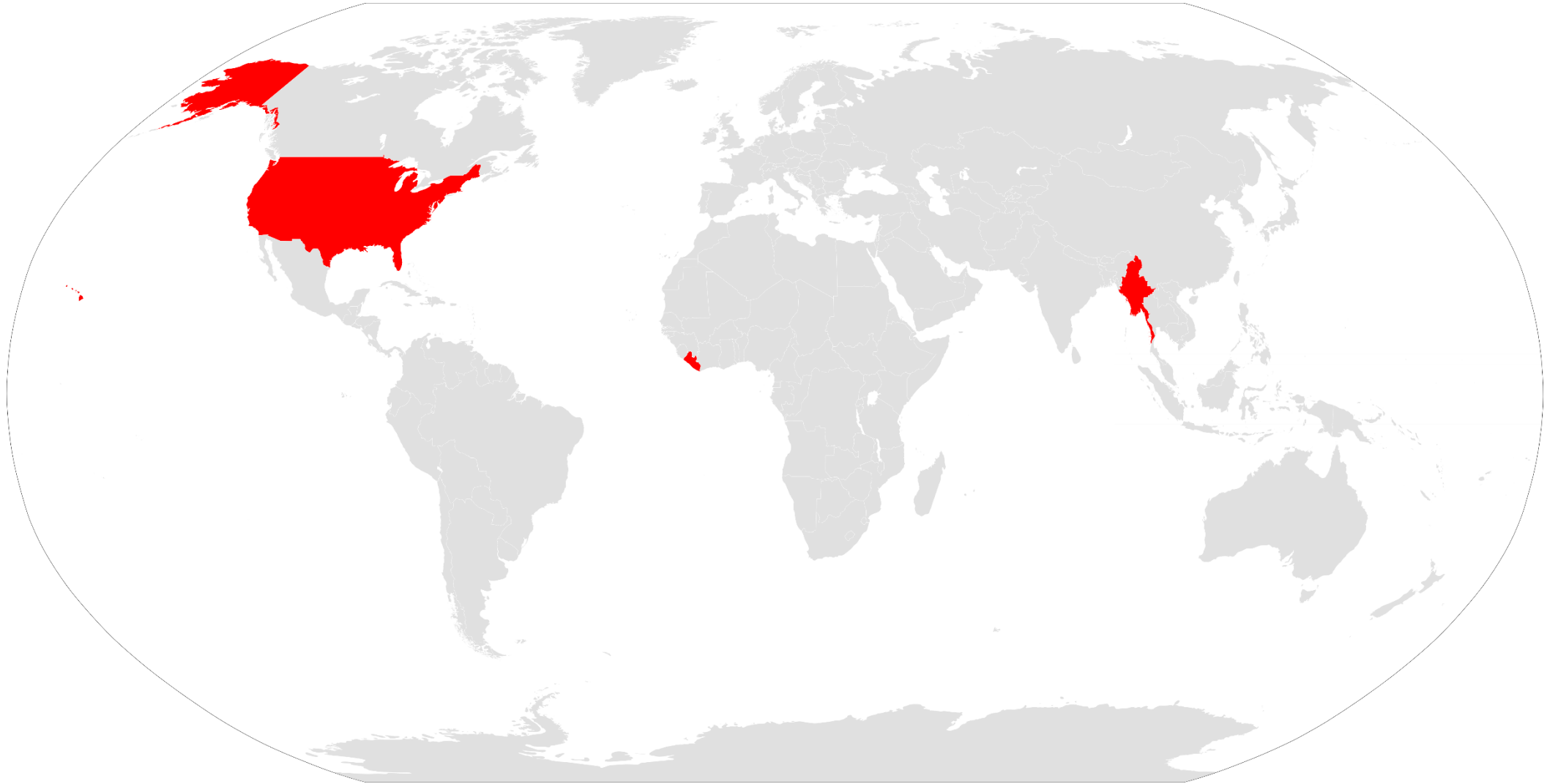
Keith C. Clarke

A World Standard

- International System of Units—or SI (Système International)
- In the US, the metric system has been used in science, education, and manufacturing since the 19th century
- Approved for use in 1866 by Congress
- SI made the basis for defining all other weights and measures in 1893
- Thomas Jefferson, pioneer of the United States Public Land Survey System, was a major advocate of decimals and the metric system in the founding years of the United States
- US maps (NGA, USGS, NOAA, Census etc) metrified following the adoption of NAD83
- MGRS, all datums and geoids, National Grid, USPLSS all metric
- The National Bureau of Standards has used the system since 1964



World map of non-compliance to SI standards



A sorry recent history



- U.S. Metric Board, created to supervise the voluntary transition to the SI, was disbanded because of federal budget cuts in 1982
- State and federal government has deliberately stalled conversion from the 1980s to today
- Some groups bitterly oppose conversion on highway signs and for weather reporting
- Result is confusion in K-12 education, for students, teachers, textbook publishers
- Nation is deliberately resisting better STEM preparation, losing international competitive advantage

But....

- Meanwhile the U.S. military has increased its use of the metric system, partly because of the need to work with other nations' militaries within NATO
- University and research community almost completely metric
- Export and science-oriented ventures often use the system exclusively
- Meanwhile, the majority of manufactured goods and trade activities have quietly voluntarily converted
- Experience shows that conversion goes relatively smoothly

What can we do?

- Recommend the reestablishment of the U.S. Metric Board
- Restate the importance for the National Map and NSDI
- Point out (and remove) the conversion absurdities (e.g. State Plane Coordinates in Nevada)
- Educate the public (and government, and publishers) about the fact that use of traditional English units is in decline
- Make recommendations for workforce training and preparation based on US Army and USNG examples
- Start thinking metric ourselves, at least in all NGAC documents

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