

Richard Stallman's blog

Selected entries from Richard's blog
(<http://agia.fsf.org/rms-blog>), from November 2004 to December 2004

Richard Stallman

Venezuela (November 15, 2004 to November 22, 2004)

I spent a week in Venezuela, giving a speech and some interviews at an event which invited speakers from all across Latin America. During the event, the state oil company PDVSA announced its decision to switch 100% to free software. Their decision is not based on convenience or cost; it is based on sovereignty.

Their computers used to be handled by a US company, SAIC. When opponents of President Chavez tried to drive him from office by shutting down oil protection, the US government helped out by telling SAIC to prevent them from using their computers. PDVSA therefore knows from experience that using non-free software means you are at the mercy of the developers, and has decided to solve the problem for good and all.

I was supposed to be interviewed on a breakfast TV show, and had to wake up at 0530 for it. When we arrived at the station, we found out that everything had been pre-empted; the prosecutor in charge of cases against people who participated in the Bush-sponsored attempt to overthrow Chavez had been killed with a bomb in his car. This act of terrorism was most likely carried out by some of the same people that Bush supports. But there are no plans to respond by abolishing civil liberties, as has been done in the US.

On Sunday I went for lunch with Sergeant Torres, who has converted many of the Venezuelan Army's servers to GNU/Linux. He brought his wife and son; his son is some-

Fig. 1: Avila national park in Venezuela



thing like 8 years old and already starting to use free software.

For dinner I went with some Venezuelan free software activists to a restaurant near the top of the mountain ridge that separates Caracas from the Caribbean. We couldn't see the sea as we sat down to eat, around 540pm, because clouds were in the way. The appetizer, a soup, was marvelous but the rest of the dinner was not quite as good.

After dinner we went to sit at a table just outside the restaurant to have coffee or tea. I felt like doing something else, so I played a Bulgarian tune on the recorder. A person sitting at another table nearby said, "That sounds Celtic, or Breton."

It is very common for people who are not accustomed to

Balkan folk dance music to think it sounds Celtic, but few say something so specific as “Breton.” So I played a Breton dance tune and said, “That was a Breton dance, Kost-ar-c’hoed.” Then I realized the man was speaking Spanish with an unusual accent, so I asked him, “Etes-vous français?” He said that he was, and in fact from Brittany. We got into a conversation and I explained free software to him and the man with him, who turned out to be the restaurant’s owner. Since he was interested, my friends then joined the conversation. Meanwhile, by this time the clouds had dissipated and we could see the shore and the sea, beautiful 6000 feet below.

Colombia (November 22, 2004 to November 24, 2004)

The following day I went to Colombia. The strength of the free software community there really surprised me. I met with people from several user groups, and on Tuesday met with enthusiastic representatives of Colombia’s major universities as well as the Mayor of Bogota, to whom I suggested that the most important way to support free software was to switch to it in the city’s schools. We agreed they would have a plan ready when I return in March.

Venezuela (December 1, 2004 to December 6, 2004)

I returned to Venezuela after Mexico, for a conference called Artists and Intellectuals in Defense of Humanity. On Saturday, our main activity was a meeting where President Chavez would speak. I had lunch that day with Sergeant-Major Torres, who has converted the Venezuelan Army’s servers to GNU/Linux, and his wife.

Since we’ve become friends, I encouraged him to come back to the hotel and try to get into the meeting too, figuring the security would probably ok his entry, and they did.

The first speaker was Sr. Perez Equivel, a Nobel Peace Prize winner. He told a fable of a chef who called together various animals to ask each one, “What sauce would you like to be cooked with?” The chicken responded, “Actually I’d rather not be cooked at all”, but the chef said, “That’s outside the discussion - all you can decide is which sauce.”

An invited American speaker then compared the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq to the wars of aggression for which

the Nazi leaders were convicted. (I supported the invasion of Afghanistan because of the totalitarian cruelty of the Taliban, which goes beyond Bush.) He described Fallujah as the Guernica of the 21st century, and warned that all countries now feel fear of being attacked by the new empire of the US. He referred to the celebration of torture, in Guantanamo as well as in Abu Ghraib, as a brutal threat against the whole world. Regime change imposed by the US, over and over, has led to a regime much worse than what preceded it; he cited the Congo, with its 37 years of tyranny, and the US-organized coup in Haiti this year, and accused the US of being behind the attempted coup in Venezuela in 2002. (The US recognized the coup leaders’ government immediately.) But the US is not merely a global scofflaw; Bush intends to be above the law, as shown by the US plans to exempt itself from the International Criminal Court - feeble as that is.

His remarks in English were interspersed with Spanish translations that were often absurdly and ridiculously incorrect. The interpreter seemed to translate most of the concepts that had just been mentioned, but often garbled their relationship. Most amazingly, she translated Martin Luther King’s famous words as “tengo sueño” (I feel sleepy) instead of “tengo un sueño” (I have a dream). I can’t imagine how a native Spanish speaker could make that mistake.

Then Daniel Ortega, former president of Nicaragua, entered the hall and people applauded him.

A deputy (congressman, more or less) from Argentina then spoke, and referred to the problem of the dictatorship of the unidimensional corporate media. He proposed setting up a Latin-American alternative to CNN which would break its dominance over news. He then referred to the bombing of Hiroshima as an act of terror - a somewhat controversial idea to an American, but possibly justified.

Then President Chavez spoke. He covered many topics, and I wished I had asked for a simultaneous translation receiver, because I couldn’t always follow his Spanish.

Chavez is greatly admired by Venezuelans, who praise him in more glowing terms than I would praise anyone (even the people I most admire). But Chavez doesn’t ask people to praise him - he directs people’s admiration to Bolivar, San Martin, and various others who fought against the colonial rule of Spain. He refers to them often, not just to their names but also to their writings and their deeds, in a way that Americans used to talk about Washington, but probably

with greater accuracy. The national anthem, which I think was changed under Chavez, praises the “brave people”.

He spoke about the recent first graduation of Project Robinson 2, a project for teaching literacy and basic school knowledge to adults who didn’t have a chance to learn before. (This project is named after Bolivar’s teacher.) He hopes to extend this program to over a million people, to help them escape from poverty. He spoke of the kitchens established for poor people, including street children, and how they have been situated near to Project Robinson 2 so as to lead them to get an education also, so they could “be their own liberators”. He spoke of educational grants of \$100 a month that have been given to half a million people so they can study. He responded to criticism that this money should be spent on building “infrastructure”, saying that building a sovereign people with dignity is more important than constructing buildings or highways. If my memory is right (I’m not sure of this), I think he also read a description from an old book of some of Bolivar’s educational policies.

Chavez spoke about the 70 clinics in poor neighborhoods that have started operating in the past year; the plan is to expand to 1400 of them, to cover 95% of the population. I visited one of these clinics, in the city of Barinas, while other invitees went to other cities and saw clinics operating there. In these clinics, about half the doctors are Cuban and half are Venezuelan. Cuba has an excellent medical system, aside from the shortage of medicines due to the US embargo, and trains many doctors; meanwhile, people told me that many Venezuelan doctors didn’t want to get their hands dirty with poor people. Chavez didn’t try to force them, he just hired Cuban doctors.

Venezuela has many kinds of cooperation with Cuba, which makes sense since the US tries to attack them both. However, I am puzzled that Chavez, who both speaks highly of democracy and practices it scrupulously, also speaks so highly of Cuba. He turns a blind eye to the fact that Castro does not hold elections, and has imprisoned a number of people for criticizing the government.

Chavez quoted the results of a survey called *Latino-barometro*, which found that in most countries in Latin America, the number of people who believe that democracy is the best form of government has fallen since 1996 - often fallen by 20% or more. In Venezuela, however, the support for democracy increased by 12% over that period. Venezuela has among the smallest percentage of people who

say they might prefer a military government, and likewise for the percentage who say they would give up freedom for the sake of order. He drew this conclusion: support for democracy is falling in many countries because their democracies have failed to deliver what the people want. They have let the IMF, the megacorporations, and/or a national oligarchy exercise power.

Early in his speech, Chavez said that he wanted especially to hear our criticisms of his policies. He later showed this was not just idle talk, because after speaking for perhaps 40 minutes he asked for questions from the audience. There were a few hundred of us in the auditorium, and quite a number wanted to ask questions or give their messages of support, so we were asked to limit ourselves to 3 minutes each. Chavez spent over 4 hours listening and responding. After listening to a number of questions, and (apparently) taking notes, he responded to them one by one.

Could you imagine any recent president of the US holding such a meeting? Bush doesn’t even accept unfiltered questions in press conferences.

In one answer, Chavez explained how Venezuela practiced voter suppression in the past. For instance, poor people were given only provisional identity cards, so they were unable to vote. He explained how he had sent trucks with computers and printers to give poor people real identity cards so they could vote, and told how a child (who I suppose wasn’t old enough to vote) was happy that he now had a real identity card with a picture of Bolivar on it.

Given my persistent opposition to national ID cards, I feel somewhat less than unalloyed happiness about this solution to the problem, although it was a good thing to make sure poor people could finally vote.

Chavez remarked that the term “*democracia popular*” ought to be redundant, because “*demo*” means “the people”; but democracy has degenerated so far in most countries as to make the term meaningful.

Another answer that he gave, when asked about the persistent US intervention in Colombia, is that in the past decade or two some had claimed imperialism had become benevolent, like a protecting father; but that after examples like Colombia and Iraq, this theory had become incredible.

He was asked what he thought about the “war on terrorism”, and said that it is “more terrorism”. “The only way to end terrorism is with justice.” I applauded that (as I did some other things). He condemned the world’s armament

spending, above all in the US, for the waste of not using this money to reduce poverty.

When it was my turn at the microphone, I raised the issue of the new law to regulate the broadcast media. This law has been cited by the opposition as a form of tyranny. I obtained a copy of the text a couple of weeks ago, and found no tyranny, but a number of rules that were stated rather broadly, and whose natural interpretations could prohibit broadcasting things from Harry Potter to various somewhat dangerous sports to my own opinions about unauthorized copying. (The term “apología al delito” seems to include that.) The law had been in discussion for over a year, but in an agonizing coincidence, just after I had written down comments on the text and started to circulate them, the law was voted on. If only the timing had been a little different, I might have been able to help make it better.

I explained how what I say in my speeches appeared to be prohibited by this law, and said that I was asking, not in the spirit of opposition but in a spirit of friendly criticism, to make sure this law would not restrict the expression of opinions on radio and TV.

Chavez responded at length to my question, as he did to many questions. Unfortunately, I couldn't follow all of his response clearly.

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Chavez explained certain distinctions, about who would be legally responsible for certain kinds of broadcasts, using the example of an interview with a person who said he wanted to kill the president, and whether the interviewer actively contributed to expressing that sentiment. This example is not unrealistic in Venezuela; he told how the TV stations had, for a period of weeks, constantly called on the public to attack Chavez (but the public didn't). The opposition now is no longer so directly violent, but still harsh by US standards. In the airport, as I left Caracas, I looked at an opposition newspaper; it condemned the government for how it has honored the recently slain prosecutor, who was prosecuting participants in the attempted coup. You would never

see a major US daily newspaper criticize Bush policies so harshly.

However, choosing that example missed the point somewhat, since calling for violence is not the same kind of case as the one I raised. Perhaps in my question I should have explicitly distinguished expressing opinions from fomenting violence. I felt I had had just one chance, and I had fumbled it just a little, and wasted the chance. I felt like a failure.

About 20 minutes later, as the meeting ended, I asked Sergeant Torres and others to explain to me the parts of Chavez' answer that I had not entirely heard or understood. They told me he said that the constitution, which overrides any law, guarantees the right to express opinions, and also that the requirements in this law will not be enforced by judges but rather by a “media responsibility committee” made up of representatives of the media, civil society, and government, which would apply all the requirements in a less strict way. People also said that the word “apología” is understood in Venezuelan law to mean something beyond merely expressing an opinion; only a direct call to commit a crime would qualify as “apología al delito”.

As a result of that, I feel my concern has been mostly resolved, but I'd still feel more comfortable if the law said this more explicitly. So I still feel a burning sense of futility from having come to the issue just barely too late.

On Sunday evening I participated in a dinner which was concerned with the plans to start Canal Sur, as they call the planned alternative to CNN. Many suggested making it a “revolutionary TV” station, and following the best progressive ideas in all ways - for instance, one suggestion was to try to represent not just Latin America but all downtrodden parts of the world.

I suggested, rather, that they follow the model of Al Jazeera, which doesn't call itself revolutionary and doesn't try to be progressive in all ways, but has succeeded in showing millions what Bush doesn't want them to see.

Spain (Santander and Bilbao) (December 13, 2004 to December 16, 2004)

My short trip this month began with speeches in Santander and Bilbao, Spain. Traveling to Santander gave me a chance to see the beautiful rock-surrounded beaches; we also had time for a brief trip to the mountains of Asturias to the west.

Fig. 2: A beach near Santander in Spain



In several languages it told me that the record could be played on Windows and Mac systems. It didn't say that the record can't be played on GNU/Linux systems with free software, but it wasn't hard to deduce that implication. They had given me a Corrupt Disk as a gift!

After my speech in Bilbao, part of an event sponsored by the Basque region's government to promote free software in local businesses, my hosts gave me a bag with a few gifts - designed, I would guess, to introduce the visiting foreigner to something about the region (mainly with a view to drumming up business, I think). The next morning, as I was getting ready to leave, I unpacked the bag. One of the gifts was a record of music by Kepa Junkera, a well-known Basque musician. I had heard the name but never heard his music, and I wanted to listen. But the front of the box said "Copy Control". Suspicious, I read the back of the box. In several languages it told me that the record could be played on Windows and Mac systems. It didn't say that the record can't be played on GNU/Linux systems with free software, but it wasn't hard to deduce that implication. They had given me a Corrupt Disk as a gift!

I think this was the first time I actually held one in my hands. How ironic. I had mentioned the EUCD in my speech, and how the unavailability of DeCSS could in itself convince

millions of people to reject free operating systems, but I don't think I specifically mentioned about Corrupt Disks. I would have mentioned them if I had suspected I'd be given one.

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I handed the disk back to the person who had invited me, saying "Here you see the face of the enemy. Please bring this back to the store and get your money back, so they won't get any profit from this - and please don't buy Corrupt Disks!"

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About the author

Richard Stallman is the founder of the GNU Project, launched in 1984 to develop the free software operating system GNU. The name "GNU" is a recursive acronym for "GNU's Not Unix".