

A reflection on the departure of RMS



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So Richard Stallman has resigned from his guest position at MIT and as President of the Free Software Foundation. You can easily find out all you need to know about the background from a web search and some news articles. I recommend in particular Selam G's original articles on this topic for background, and for an excellent institutional version, the statement from the Software Freedom Conservancy.

But I'll give you a personal take. By my reckoning, I worked for RMS longer than any other programmer.

1) There has been some bad reporting, and that's a problem. While I have not waded through the entire email thread Selam G. has posted, my reaction was that RMS did not defend Epstein, and did not say that the victim in this case was acting voluntarily. But it's not the most important problem. It's not remotely close to being the most important problem.

2) This was an own-goal for RMS. He has had plenty of opportunities to learn how to stfu when that's necessary. He's responsible for relying too much on people's careful reading of his note, but even that's not the problem.

He thought that Marvin Minsky was being unfairly accused. Minsky was his friend for many many years, and I think he carries a lot of affection and loyalty for his memory. But Minsky is also dead, and there's plenty of time to discuss at leisure whatever questions there may be about his culpability.

RMS treated the problem as being "let's make sure we don't criticize Minsky unfairly", when the problem was actually, "how can we come to terms with a history of MIT's institutional neglect of its responsibilities toward women and its apparent complicity with Epstein's crimes". While it is true we should not treat Minsky unfairly, it was not — and is not — a pressing concern, and by making it his concern, RMS signaled clearly that it was much more important to him than the question of the institution's patterns of problematic coddling of bad behavior.

And, I think, some of those focusing themselves on careful parsing of RMS's words are falling into the same pitfall as he. His intentions do not matter nearly as much as his actions and their predictable effects.

Add to all this RMS's background of having defended the idea of adults having sex with minors under some circumstances, and people's visceral and sharp reaction was entirely sensible.

3) Minsky was RMS's protector for a long long time. He created the AI Lab, where I think RMS found the only happy home he ever knew. He kept the rest of the Institute at bay and insulated RMS from attack (as did other faculty that also had befriended RMS).

I was around for most of the 90s, and I can confirm the unfortunate reality that RMS's behavior was a concern at the time, and that this protection was itself part of the problem. He was never held to account; he was himself coddled in his own lower-grade misbehavior and mistreatment of women. He made the place uncomfortable for a lot of people, and especially women.

To my shame I didn't recognize the dynamic myself when I was around it. I thought he was trying to be charming and witty, and I knew it weirded many out. But at the time I didn't put that together with what it would be like for women who were weirded out or alienated, who felt threatened, etc.

4) RMS's loss of MIT privileges and leadership of the FSF are the appropriate responses to a pattern of decades of poor behavior. It does not matter if they are appropriate responses to a single email thread, because they are the right thing in the total situation.

5) I feel very sad for him. He's a tragic figure. He is one of the most brilliant people I've met, who I have always thought desperately craved friendship and camaraderie, and seems to have less and less of it all the time. This is all his doing; nobody does it to him. But it's still very sad. As far as I can tell, he believes his entire life's work is a failure.

6) The end result here, while sad for him, is correct.

The free software community needs to develop good leadership, and RMS has been a bad leader in many ways for a long time now. He has had plenty of people who have tried to help him, and he does not want help.

MIT needs to establish as best it can that paramount are the interests of women to have a safe and fair place to study and work. It must make clear that this is more important than the coddling of a whiny child who has never reached the emotional maturity to treat people decently.

Indeed, RMS's mere presence on the scene in this way has served to make it harder to deal with other cases of bad leaders' bad behavior. It is time for the free software community to leave adolescence and move to adulthood, and this requires leaving childish tantrums, abusive language, and toxic environments behind.

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