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Open Source is good for America - US military advised

By [Andrew Orlowski](#) in [San Francisco](#)

Posted: 29/10/2002 at 08:30 GMT

A report commissioned by the US military concludes that open source and free software should play a greater part in the infrastructure of the world's remaining superpower.

Mitre Corporation's 152-page study addresses the extent of *software libre*, or FOSS-licensed software use - FOSS being "Free and Open Source Software", an acronym uncomfortably evocative to this author of dental hygiene - in various branches of the military.

It's all over the place already, conclude the authors, and there should be more of it.

"In the long term removing FOSS would remove an important source of price and quality competition. Without the constant pressure of low-cost, high-quality FOSS product competing with the closed-source products, the closed-source vendors could more easily fall into a cycle in which their support costs balloon and costs are passed on to their locked-in customers."

Why?

"... to promote product diversity. FOSS applications tend to be much lower in cost than their proprietary equivalents, yet they often provide high levels of functionality with good user acceptance."

That doesn't mean *software libre* should be compulsory. It works best, notes Mitre, when people find the software and not vice versa. It rejects making it mandatory and notes that when users were "force fitted" to use a free software product for ideological reasons- the gcc compiler features in an example cited - the result might not be satisfactory.

The report recommends the DoD create a "safe list" of

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approved products, encourage interoperability with commercial software, and promote it all round as A Good Thing.

There are a couple of interesting aspects to Mitre's conclusions. The report doesn't take a side on Microsoft's argument that a commercial model sustains long term development and better support. That argument has been articulated by open source advocates who have little common cause with Redmond, such as Larry McVoy, whose BitKeeper product is used to maintain the Linux kernel.

But it does torpedo one of Microsoft's more emotive arguments: that the GPL is a toxic, capitalist-munching virus.

"A common assumption about FOSS licenses such as GPL is that their transitive user rights means they cannot be used with non-FOSS (e.g., government or proprietary) software," notes Mitre. "However, this is generally not the case; such mixing can generally be done in various ways. For example, even GPL with its strong protection of transitive user rights provides a number of mechanisms to allow such mixing."

Mitre then explains how "Microsoft provides a good example of an innovative use of one such mixing strategy in their Windows Services for Unix (SFU)6 product. This product uses proprietary software to build an initial bridge between Windows and UNIX operating systems, and then adds in GPL tools and utilities to extend greatly its overall emulation of UNIX. Users benefit from the extended functionality provided by the GPL components, while Microsoft benefits by avoiding the cost and time of re-developing the tools as proprietary software. "

See. It's even good for Microsoft. ®

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