

COGPLEXITI · SYSTEMS & DECISION ANALYSIS

ONE PATCH IS NOT ONE CULTURE

Identity as Operational
Infrastructure in the United
States Wildland Fire Service

JAYSON COIL

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WHITE PAPER

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How to Read This Paper

This white paper is the flagship of a four-paper set in the Cogplexiti Systems & Decision Analysis line, written in the agency-facing register and following the house analytical format. It consumes *The Second Skill* as its mechanism — shared decision doctrine as the one identity substrate five legacy cultures can adopt without surrendering their own — and its indicators register applies the same assumption-indicator-response discipline as *Order It and It Comes*. It is written to the problem and the office, not to persons.

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1. Executive Summary

The United States Wildland Fire Service consolidates the Department of the Interior's four wildland fire programs — Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Indian Affairs — into one service. Behind the merger that has occurred stands the one that may: whether and when Forest Service wildland fire, the largest of the federal fire cultures and the only one outside Interior, crosses the departmental seam and joins. This paper addresses both stages, because the culture problem is the same problem at two moments, and the choices made in the first stage set the terms available in the second. Each of the five legacy cultures is a rational adaptation to a parent agency's mission, land base, and incentive history. None of them transfers automatically to a new organization, and none can be declared the culture of the whole without the others experiencing the declaration as conquest.

The default future has a name and a documented record. The Department of Homeland Security merged twenty-two agencies in 2003 and remains, two decades later, administratively unified and culturally unmerged: identity persisting along legacy component lines, management integration on the Government Accountability Office's high-risk list since the year of standup, and employee-morale rankings at the bottom of the federal government for most of the agency's existence. DHS is what happens when a merger is executed on the organization chart and culture is left to sort itself out. Nothing about the new fire service exempts it from that outcome by default.

The stakes are operational, not atmospheric. A national fire service must run on mission command — centralized intent, decentralized execution — because fire does not wait for headquarters. Mission command depends on a chain with no skippable links: decentralized execution requires shared intent; shared intent requires shared interpretive frames; shared interpretive frames are what a common culture *is*, stated operationally. An organization whose members interpret the same order five different ways cannot command by intent and will be forced, incident by incident and policy by policy, toward centralized control — the precise failure mode a continental-scale fire service cannot afford in a lengthening fire year.

Culture cannot be ordered into existence. But the substrate it grows on can be chosen deliberately, and the choice is available for a limited time. Heritage is unavailable as a substrate by construction: five heritages compete, and elevating any one demotes four. What all five cultures can adopt simultaneously, without surrendering anything, is a shared way of making decisions under uncertainty — common decision doctrine, a common schoolhouse experience at defined career gates, and a common vocabulary for critique and review. The historical cases that got this right, examined below, built identity out of shared practice rather than shared past: the Royal Air Force manufactured a third culture from two hostile parents through its schools and career structure, and Special

Operations Command layered a joint identity over intact service identities through common selection and common doctrine. The substrate argument carries a further implication for the second stage: identity built from shared practice does not require the organization chart to move first. A common decision grammar can be adopted across the Interior–Agriculture seam by agreement, ahead of any structural merger — lowering the cultural cost of the second consolidation every year if it comes, and paying interoperability dividends at the seam if it does not. It is the only integration strategy robust to the second-stage decision going either way. The recommended course of action gives the Service that substrate, an owner for it, and — because assertion is not evidence — an indicators register that measures whether integration is actually occurring, with the baseline collected in the standup year while a baseline still exists to collect.

2. Support and Analysis

2.1 Identity Is Infrastructure

The dependency chain. Mission command is the only command philosophy that scales to wildland fire. The alternative — detailed, centralized control — fails on arithmetic alone: the decision tempo of a hundred simultaneous incidents across four time zones exceeds any headquarters' capacity to direct, and the information needed for most fireline decisions exists only at the fireline. Doctrine has said this for a century in the military context (the lineage runs from Moltke's *Auftragstaktik* through current U.S. Army mission command doctrine; Bungay 2011; U.S. Army 2019), and the fire service has said it in its own dialect — leader's intent, delegation of authority, the expectation that a division supervisor solves the division's problems.

But mission command is not a policy choice that takes effect on signature. It is the visible top of a dependency chain. Decentralized execution is safe only when subordinates converge on the *same reading* of intent that the commander holds — otherwise delegation is just dispersion of error. Convergent reading of intent requires shared interpretive frames: common assumptions about what words mean, what risks are acceptable, what "aggressive" or "hold" or "disengage" implies in context, what a leader would want in the situation the order did not anticipate. And shared interpretive frames are not a personality trait or a communications product. They are the operational definition of culture. Weick and Roberts (1993) documented the mechanism on carrier flight decks: high-reliability performance emerges from *heedful interrelating* — individuals acting on a shared representation of the collective task — and degrades exactly when that shared representation frays.

Run the chain backward and the claim of this section falls out: an organization without a common culture cannot sustain mission command. It can write intent statements, but it cannot trust them to be read uniformly, so it compensates. It adds specificity to orders. It adds approval steps. It pulls decisions upward, one burned-finger memo at a time. Centralization arrives not as a chosen philosophy but as scar tissue — and a fire service centralizes at the cost of tempo, which in this domain is paid in acres and exposure.

The cost of absence, made concrete. Integration friction is not hypothetical; the pre-consolidation system already displayed it wherever legacy lines were crossed. The Interior consolidation internalizes the seams among its four programs — which converts that friction from an interagency coordination cost into the new service's own culture problem — and it leaves the largest seam in the federal fire system, the Interior-Agriculture boundary, standing as the service's most consequential external interface until and unless a second consolidation closes it. Resource orders that move cleanly inside one legacy system acquire friction at the seam — differing interpretations of qualification equivalency, differing risk thresholds for the same aviation mission, differing expectations about what an ordered resource arrives ready to do. Incident transitions expose interpretation gaps: the same delegation language means measurably different things to teams raised in different legacy traditions, and the difference surfaces at 0200 when the interpretations collide. Every such collision is small. The tax is the sum, levied on every operation, forever, until the frames converge — or the Service gives up and centralizes.

One clarification guards the whole argument. Identity work in large organizations has a deserved reputation problem: values posters, wallet cards, campaigns that consume budget and produce cynicism. This paper is not about any of that. Branding is what an organization says about itself. Culture is what its members predictably do — and, more precisely here, how they predictably *interpret*. The first is a communications product. The second is operational infrastructure, and it is the only sense of "identity" this paper defends.

2.2 Five Cultures, Five Rationalities

Four of these cultures are now inside one service. The fifth — the largest — remains outside it, as the standing service's principal interoperability partner and its possible future component. The survey covers all five, because the culture problem spans both stages. The analysis must pass through the same discipline the rest of this corpus applies to every actor: local rationality. Each of the five fire cultures is a rational adaptation to its parent agency's mission, land base, and incentive history. Describing their differences is diagnosis. Ranking them would be malpractice, and treating any one as the natural template for the whole is the specific error the merger cannot survive.

The Forest Service fire culture grew inside a multiple-use land management agency where, for most of a century, fire was every employee's collateral duty — the militia tradition — and suppression effectiveness was an agency-defining public commitment. It is the largest of the five, carries the deepest institutional heritage (hotshot and smokejumper lineages, the great fires that shaped national policy), and its internal norms reflect an agency where fire management and land management were never fully separable. Its size and history would make it the presumptive template in any consolidation it joins — the silent assumption that the largest culture becomes the default culture — which is exactly why, if the second stage comes, the presumption must be surfaced and examined rather than allowed to operate silently. The same size produces the reciprocal anxiety: a young service that has begun forming its own identity would be absorbing a component larger than itself, and both directions of that fear are legitimate objects for the indicators register rather than for reassurance.

The BLM fire culture is an adaptation to the Great Basin and the sagebrush steppe: fine fuels, wind, and fire that wins or loses in the first burning period. It prizes speed, aviation, and engine mobility, and it professionalized fire as a primary occupation earlier and more completely than agencies where fire competed with other field duties. Its instinct — hit it fast, hit it hard, tonight — is not aggression as temperament. It is the correct answer to cheatgrass.

The Park Service fire culture formed inside a preservation mission and was the earliest institutional adopter of fire as an ecological process, committing to prescribed and natural fire management decades before it was fashionable and carrying the scar tissue — Yellowstone 1988 chief among it — of defending that commitment in public. It operates under a visitor-protection overlay no other legacy culture carries at the same intensity, and its members are practiced at holding two publics: the one that wants every fire out, and the resource that needs some of them to burn.

The Fish and Wildlife Service fire culture is the smallest and proportionally the most fire-forward: refuge management in fire-adapted systems, above all the Southeast, where burning is not an event but a rhythm. Proportionally to its size, no legacy culture puts more of its effort into intentional fire. Its frame treats fire primarily as a habitat instrument, with suppression as the exception state — nearly the inverse of the suppression-first frames elsewhere, and rational for exactly the same reason the others are.

The BIA fire culture operates inside the federal trust responsibility and alongside tribal nations whose fire knowledge predates every other institution in this list by centuries. Its workforce is embedded in the communities it serves to a degree unique among the five; fire is simultaneously an operational program, an economic engine, and — through cultural burning traditions the broader system is only lately learning to respect — a practice with meaning that the other four cultures' vocabularies do not fully contain.

Two implications follow from the survey. First, these cultures will not converge on their own merely because the letterhead changed; each is anchored to a mission and a landscape that the merger does not abolish, and the missions remain in productive tension (a suppression-speed frame and a fire-as-rhythm frame are both correct, on their home ground). Second — and this constrains the entire solution space — any integration approach that requires one culture's heritage to become the Service's heritage fails at contact with the other four. Whatever the common identity is built from, it cannot be built from anyone's past.

2.3 Three Mergers

The claim that culture can be deliberately built — and the claim that neglecting it has a price — are both empirical. Three cases carry the evidence: one cautionary, two constructive, each selected because it isolates a different part of the mechanism. Each is examined at the same four points: what merged and under what pressure, what was done about culture, what the record shows, and what transfers.

DHS: merger by organization chart.

What merged. The Homeland Security Act of 2002 consolidated twenty-two agencies and nearly 180,000 employees into a new department that stood up on March 1, 2003 — the largest reorganization of the federal government since the National Security Act created the Department of Defense in 1947. The urgency was real and the rationale was sound on its face: the components — Coast Guard, Secret Service, the dismembered INS, FEMA, the Customs Service, the infant TSA, and more — held pieces of a mission that September 11 had shown to be fatally fragmented. The components also held some of the oldest and strongest institutional cultures in the federal government. The Coast Guard traces its lineage to 1790; the Secret Service to 1865; each arrived with its own identity, promotion culture, risk norms, and interpretive habits, formed over generations against its own mission.

What was done about culture. Almost nothing deliberate, and nothing early. Integration effort under standup pressure went where standup pressure sends it: structure, reporting lines, appropriations mechanics, a headquarters, a seal, a mission statement. Culture was treated as a residual — something that shared letterhead and shared mission language would eventually produce. Later leadership recognized the gap and mounted corrective campaigns, most visibly the 2014 Unity of Effort initiative, but these arrived a decade into the department's life, as remediation of a culture already set along component lines rather than formation of one that was not yet set.

What the record shows. The DHS record is unusually valuable because oversight bodies have measured the outcome continuously for two decades, which makes it the best-

documented natural experiment in what structural merger produces without a cultural substrate. GAO placed DHS implementation and management integration on its high-risk list in 2003 — the year of standup — and versions of that designation have survived every subsequent high-risk update; twenty years of reports document progress in management *systems* alongside persistent difficulty functioning as one enterprise (GAO 2023). The workforce data tell the same story from below: DHS has ranked at or near the bottom of large federal agencies in employee-engagement and best-places-to-work indices for most of its existence, including multi-year runs in last place, with engagement clustering by legacy component (Partnership for Public Service, multiple years). And the operational bill arrived early. When Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, the congressional investigations that followed found that FEMA — an agency that had entered the merger with a functioning identity and emerged from it buried in a new bureaucracy, its direct lines to the President severed and its senior experience departing — performed catastrophically below its pre-merger capability; Congress legislated partial autonomy back into FEMA the following year through the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act (U.S. Senate 2006). That is the cost of cultural neglect stated in operational currency rather than survey rankings: a component's capability degraded by absorption, discovered during the emergency, repaired by statute afterward.

What transfers. Time alone does not integrate. Twenty years of shared budget process, shared letterhead, and recurring identity campaigns did not produce a shared culture, because none of those things is a substrate culture can grow on — and remediation a decade late is fighting a culture that has already formed, along the only lines available to it: the legacy ones. DHS is the null hypothesis, funded and run for two decades, and it is what the fire service consolidation becomes by default if culture is left as a residual of structure.

SOCOM: identity layered over intact identities.

What merged and under what pressure. The path to U.S. Special Operations Command runs through two operational failures. At Desert One in April 1980, the Iran hostage rescue force — assembled ad hoc from four services' units that had never trained together, under a command structure improvised for the mission — lost eight men and the mission without contact with the enemy; the Holloway Commission's review traced the failure to exactly that ad hoc character (Holloway 1980). Grenada in 1983 showed the same disease in a larger body: special operations elements misemployed by conventional commanders, joint coordination improvised, communications incompatible across service lines. Congress concluded that the services, left to themselves, would never fix it — and imposed the fix over their institutional resistance: the Nunn-Cohen Amendment of 1986, riding on Goldwater-Nichols, created a unified combatant command with service-like authorities, activated in April 1987 (Locher 2002; Marquis 1997). The detail worth keeping: SOCOM, like the fire service consolidation, was not the components' idea. It was created from

outside, over the objection of every parent institution, which makes its cultural success the more instructive.

What was done about culture. SOCOM's architects made a precise choice that distinguishes it from DHS: they did not attempt to replace the component cultures, and they did not leave the joint level empty. The legacy identities were left fully intact — SEALs remained Navy, Special Forces remained Army, each component kept its selection pipelines, its heritage, its uniforms, its promotion boards, its tribal pride. Over them, deliberately, a thin joint layer was constructed almost entirely out of shared practice: common doctrine and a common professional canon (the SOF Truths — humans over hardware, quality over quantity, special operations forces cannot be mass-produced or created after the emergency arrives — articulated in John Collins's 1987 congressional study and adopted as the enterprise's core doctrine); common professional military education, eventually institutionalized in a joint university; common mission-planning and force-generation grammars that let a mixed-component task force assemble against a problem in hours; and — the structural guarantee — Major Force Program 11, a protected budget line that gave the joint layer resources no parent service could starve. The layer prescribed no component's tactics and honored no component's heritage above another's. It standardized how the enterprise decides, plans, educates, and pays.

What the record shows. The before-and-after is stark. The enterprise that could not merge four services' units for a single mission in 1980 spent the post-9/11 decades routinely fielding task forces that blend components into single organisms — same grammar, different patches — at a tempo and integration depth no observer of Desert One would have predicted. Component identities did not weaken; by most accounts they strengthened. The joint layer did not need them to weaken. That is the finding.

What transfers. A merger does not face a binary between five cultures and one. It can preserve five heritages under one operating layer, provided the layer is built from practice — doctrine, education, planning grammar, protected resourcing — rather than from anyone's past. The honest limit on the analogy is stated in the Red Team assessment: SOCOM's identity *intensity* rides on selection pipelines the fire service cannot replicate, so what transfers is the layering architecture, not the elite mystique. For the mechanism that installs a layer across a workforce that was inherited rather than selected, the record offers a better case.

RAF 1918: manufacturing a third culture from two hostile parents.

What merged and under what pressure. Britain entered the First World War with two air arms — the Army's Royal Flying Corps and the Navy's Royal Naval Air Service — competing for aircraft, engines, and men, with duplicated procurement and no unified answer to the war's new problem: air defense of the homeland. The Gotha daylight raids of summer 1917, which killed schoolchildren in London while the two air arms' fighters chased them under separate commands, produced the political rupture; Jan Smuts's

second report to the War Cabinet that August recommended a unified air service under its own ministry (Smuts 1917). The Royal Air Force stood up on April 1, 1918 — the world's largest air force at its formation — merging two organizations with different ranks, different uniforms, different traditions, and officers whose loyalty ran to the parents, not the child. Unlike DHS and SOCOM, the RAF then had to survive its own parents: through the postwar retrenchment, both the Army and the Admiralty campaigned openly to dismember the new service and repatriate their air arms, and in the budget climate of the Geddes Axe they very nearly succeeded.

What was done about culture. Trenchard, restored as Chief of the Air Staff in 1919, answered with what remains the clearest statement of the substrate strategy ever written by a practitioner. His memorandum on the permanent organization of the RAF (Trenchard 1919) allocated a starvation budget *away* from front-line squadrons and *into* the institutions that manufacture airmen: a cadet college at Cranwell to form officers whose entire professional identity would be RAF identity; an aircraft apprentice scheme at Halton to grow the service's own technical class rather than borrow soldiers and sailors; a staff college at Andover to give the service its own way of thinking about its own problems. Around the schools he built the markers that made the new identity legible — a distinct rank structure adopted in 1919, a distinct uniform — but the markers were the paint, not the structure. Trenchard's own framing of the memorandum was that he was laying the foundations of a castle while only able to afford a cottage; the foundations he chose, under existential budget pressure, were schools. Meanwhile the service bought time by demonstrating cheap operational utility in imperial policing — usefulness kept the parents at bay while the schools did the slow work.

What the record shows. It worked, on roughly a generational clock. The Salisbury Committee affirmed the independent air force in 1923 against sustained Army and Navy pressure; by the 1930s the RAF's officers and senior NCOs were increasingly Cranwell and Halton products who had never been soldiers or sailors; and by 1940 the culture was consolidated beyond argument. And the case carries a built-in control group that tests the substrate hypothesis in the negative direction. The one community whose *daily practice* remained anchored to a parent's mission — naval aviation, embarked with the fleet, living the Navy's rhythms whatever its cap badge said — never fully joined the new culture. The friction was managed through two decades of dual-control compromises and ended the only way it could: the Inskip decision of 1937 returned the Fleet Air Arm to the Admiralty, with the transfer complete by 1939. Where practice was shared, identity took, even across two hostile heritages. Where practice stayed with the legacy mission, identity followed the practice out the door. One institution, both directions, same mechanism.

What transfers. Three things, each load-bearing for the fire service case. First, the workforce problem: Trenchard selected no one — he inherited two complete air arms, exactly as the Service inherits five complete fire organizations, and built the third culture

with the people he had. Second, the mechanism: schools and career structure at the gates where professionals are formed, funded even when funding them meant fielding fewer squadrons — the priority call a standup-year leadership will recognize as the hard one. Third, the clock: a generation, not a fiscal year, with the Fleet Air Arm coda as the standing warning about any community whose daily practice the common institutions never reach.

What the three cases triangulate. DHS shows that structural merger plus time produces nothing by itself, and that the bill is paid operationally, not just in morale surveys. SOCOM shows that a practice-based layer can unify an enterprise without erasing its components — and that a merger imposed from outside over institutional resistance can still succeed culturally if the layer is built. The RAF shows where the layer is installed — schools, doctrine, career structure — that it can be installed across an inherited, unselected workforce, and that identity tracks daily practice with almost mechanical fidelity, in both directions. None of the three built a common identity from heritage. All three outcomes turned on whether members' formative and daily *practice* was shared. And the SOCOM case carries one additional transfer for the second stage: its joint layer unified forces that never left their parent services — the practice layer did not require the parent affiliations to dissolve first, which is precisely the property a decision grammar needs at the Interior–Agriculture seam, where structure may or may not follow. The cases differ from the fire service and from each other in era, mission, and legal setting — the analogy discipline is to borrow their mechanisms, not their glamour — but the mechanism is the same one Weick and Roberts found on the flight deck: shared frames grow where practice is shared, and nowhere else.

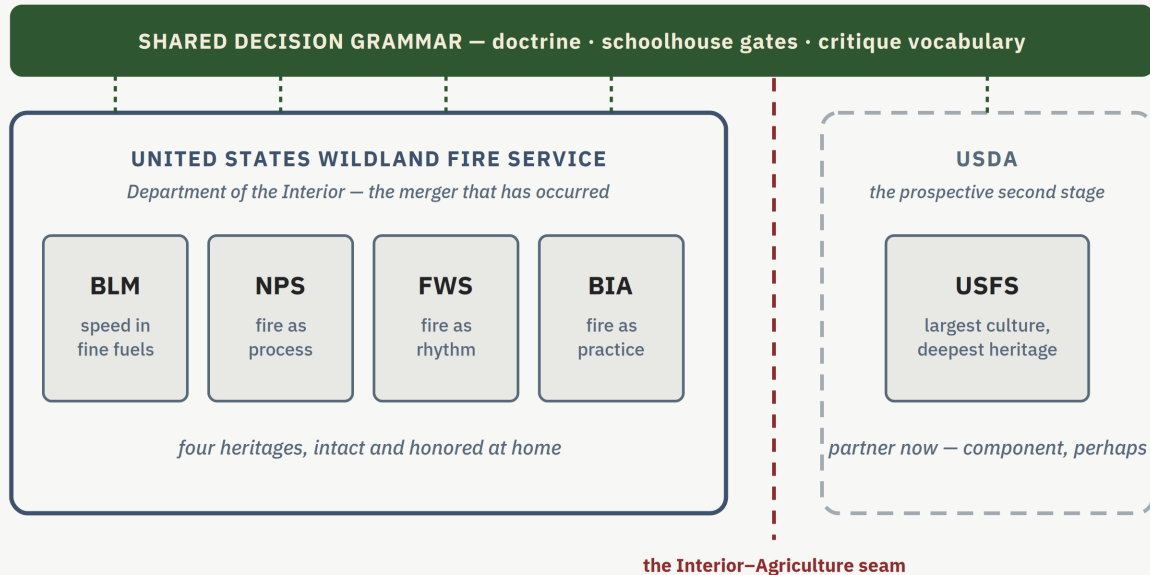
2.4 The Substrate Argument

The pieces now assemble. The Service needs a common culture because mission command requires shared interpretive frames (2.1). The common culture cannot be built from heritage, because the heritages compete — four inside the standing service, five if the second consolidation comes — and elevating one is conquest (2.2). The historical record says common culture grows where practice is shared, and is installed through schools, doctrine, and career structure (2.3). The question reduces to: what practice can all five legacy cultures share *without surrendering their home-ground adaptations* — without BLM giving up speed, without FWS giving up the burning rhythm, without BIA giving up community embeddedness?

FIGURE 1

The practice layer spans the seam

Heritage-based identity stops at the department line. A layer built from shared practice can be adopted by agreement, ahead of structure — integrating the four now and lowering the cost of the fifth if it comes.



Practice-based identity does not know the line is there.

There is exactly one candidate, and the five cultures already share a primitive version of it: the way decisions get made under uncertainty. Every legacy culture briefs, sizes up, commits resources against incomplete information, manages risk, and reviews outcomes. They do it in five dialects. A shared decision doctrine — a common vocabulary for intent, assumptions, inflection points, and critique; a common set of trained decision disciplines; a common format for how commitments are briefed and how frames are audited — standardizes none of the *answers*. BLM's answer to cheatgrass and FWS's answer to a refuge burn unit remain their own. What it standardizes is the *grammar* in which answers are formed, briefed, and reviewed — and the grammar is precisely the layer mission command runs on. Two leaders from different legacy cultures who share decision grammar can exchange a division at 0200 with high-fidelity intent transfer, whatever patches they grew up wearing.

This is where the companion analysis joins. The Service's qualification inheritance trains recognition and leaves the critique of recognition — the second skill — untrained and unmeasured in every legacy pipeline equally (Coil 2026b). That symmetry is an asset hiding in a deficiency: a competency no legacy culture owns is a competency all five can adopt without precedence disputes. Common decision doctrine built around trained

frame-discipline is new ground for everyone, which makes it the rare acquisition that costs no culture its standing.

The installation mechanism follows the RAF and SOCOM findings rather than the values-campaign tradition. Doctrine gives the grammar a written home. A common schoolhouse experience at defined career gates — not a onetime orientation but the Service's own crucible courses at the thresholds where leaders are made — gives every future supervisor a formative professional experience that is *Service* experience, the Cranwell mechanism sized to fire. A common critique vocabulary in AARs and reviews makes the grammar self-reinforcing in daily practice, the carrier-deck mechanism. What a SOCOM operator's patch actually certifies is the pipeline everyone wearing it survived; what the Service's patch should come to certify is the decision discipline everyone wearing it was trained and measured in. That is one patch standing for one culture — earned the only way the record shows it can be.

The two-stage structure strengthens the argument rather than complicating it. Within the standing service, the grammar is the integration mechanism for the Interior four. Across the departmental seam, it is something no organization chart can offer: integration that begins before — and regardless of whether — the structural merger occurs. Doctrine, schoolhouse seats, and critique vocabulary can be extended to Forest Service fire by agreement, the way the interagency system has always shared standards and qualifications. If the second consolidation comes, it arrives to a workforce already sharing one decision grammar, and the hardest part of the merger is behind it before the legislation is drafted. If it never comes, the seam still runs on shared frames every time an order, a team, or a delegation crosses it. Heritage-based identity cannot do this; it stops at the department line. Practice-based identity does not know the line is there.

3. Red Team Assessment

3.1 The SOCOM analogy flatters the argument. SOCOM's culture rides on a mechanism the Service cannot use: selection. Every wearer of the joint identity volunteered twice, passed an assessment pipeline that washes out most candidates, and arrived pre-loaded with elite self-concept. The Service inherits its entire workforce on day one and selects no one. If the analogy's force depends on selection, it fails at transfer. The rebuttal narrows the borrowing honestly: what this paper takes from SOCOM is not the selection pipeline but the *layering architecture* — joint identity over intact component identities, built from doctrine and common education — and the layering architecture does not depend on selectivity. The RAF case covers the gap from the other side: Trenchard also selected no one at the merger; he inherited two complete air arms and built the third culture through schools and career structure applied to the workforce he had. The pairing of the two cases is deliberate, and the paper must present it as such

rather than leaning on SOCOM's glamour. Where the challenge retains force: SOCOM's crucible produces identity *intensity* the Service will not replicate, and expectations should be calibrated to the RAF's timeline — a generation, not a fiscal year.

3.2 Culture-by-doctrine can read as the sixth culture conquering the five. The paper argues heritage cannot be imposed, then proposes to install a decision grammar from the top. A field-level reader raised in any of the legacy cultures can reasonably ask what distinguishes this imposition from the heritage-elevation the paper forbids — particularly if the doctrine arrives authored by headquarters staff, flavored by whichever legacy culture staffed the drafting team, and rolled out with mandatory-training aesthetics. The distinction is real but must be *engineered*, not asserted: grammar differs from heritage in that it prescribes how commitments are formed and briefed, not whose traditions are honored — but the difference evaporates if the doctrine smells like one legacy dialect promoted to national language. The COA carries the countermeasures: drafting representation from all five legacy cultures with the drafting roster published; adoption of the doctrine through the schoolhouse and evaluation system rather than by memo; and a deliberate audit of the doctrine's examples, vignettes, and vocabulary for legacy-dialect dominance. If the Service cannot staff the drafting table credibly, this objection wins and the initiative should wait until it can.

3.3 The timing objection: standup years belong to payroll. The Service's first years will be consumed by pay tables, hiring authorities, qualification portability, housing, and fire seasons that do not pause for reorganization. Culture is important-but-not-urgent, and important-but-not-urgent items in a standup year are deferred items; deferred twice, they become DHS. The paper answers with the one claim in the analysis that is genuinely perishable: the indicators baseline. Integration drift can only be measured against a starting point, and the starting point exists only now — attrition patterns, morale by legacy component, cross-legacy assignment flows, the language of the first AARs. A baseline costs a data call, not a program. The schoolhouse can wait a year; the measurement cannot. This gives leadership a first-90-days action that is cheap, defensible against every competing urgency, and preserves the whole initiative's feasibility. If the paper fails to convert this into an early ask, 3.3 predicts its fate accurately.

3.4 The administrative-integration counterclaim. A reader can grant every word about culture and still argue the binding constraint is elsewhere: pay disparities and quals portability will drive attrition and friction faster than interpretive frames will. This is likely *true in the first two years* — and it is not a rebuttal, because the administrative fixes and the cultural substrate are not competing for the same budget or the same staff. The paper should concede the sequencing openly: administrative integration is the tourniquet, cultural substrate is the physiology. The error DHS made was not choosing administration first; it was concluding, year after year, that administration was all there was.

4. Dissenting Alternative

Culture should not be engineered; the fires will do it. The credible alternative holds that wildland fire already possesses what DHS never had: a genuine common crucible, operating for decades. Interagency incident management teams, shared fire assignments, the qualification system's common architecture, and forty years of standing next to each other on the line have already fused an operational culture that crosses legacy boundaries — including, daily, the departmental seam this paper treats as the system's largest — ask anyone who has watched a Type 1 team, drawn from four agencies, function as one organism by the second operational period. On this reading, the five legacy cultures are already subcultures of a real, emergent, interagency fire culture; the merger merely draws an administrative boundary around something that exists. Deliberate culture-building is therefore unnecessary at best, and at worst counterproductive — the record of imposed identity programs (mandatory values campaigns, forced-march team-building) is worse than the record of benign neglect, because imposition generates the cynicism it was meant to prevent. The strongest form of the dissent: the IMT system is standing proof that shared practice produces shared culture *without* headquarters involvement, and the real integration risks are exactly the administrative ones — pay, portability, housing — that Section 3.4 already flagged.

The dissent is substantially right about the mechanism and wrong about the coverage, and the concession it wins is written into the COA. It is right that the incident environment is a working crucible — which *confirms* the paper's causal claim (shared practice builds shared frames) rather than refuting it. It is wrong about coverage in two ways. First, the crucible reaches the militia and the team community — the fraction of the workforce that rotates through large incidents — and reaches it unevenly; the permanent workforce of a refuge in Georgia and an engine module in the Great Basin can pass whole careers with thin exposure. Culture built only on incidents is culture concentrated in the incident-going class, which is its own two-tier failure mode. Second, the incident crucible fuses frames for *incident* work while leaving the interpretive gaps that matter most in a merged service — risk appetite in the home unit, what programmatic words mean, how reviews are conducted — untouched. The corrected conclusion, which the COA adopts: the Service's culture strategy should *protect and extend* the convergence mechanisms that demonstrably work (interagency assignments, shared teams, the common qualification architecture) and add deliberately only what those mechanisms cannot reach — the schoolhouse gates and the decision grammar that carry shared frames to the workforce the fires never fuse.

5. Recommended Course of Action

5.1 Make culture a commander's problem with an owner and a timeline.

Integration of the five cultures is assigned as a line responsibility with a named senior owner, objectives, and reporting rhythm — not delegated to an HR or communications function, where it becomes a campaign. The DHS record is the argument: culture left ownerless defaults to the org chart, and the org chart cannot hold it. The owner's charter is written around the dependency chain in Section 2.1 — the deliverable is mission-command capability across legacy lines, not morale scores.

5.2 Collect the indicators baseline in the standup year. The register from this analysis, instrumented before drift begins: attrition and transfer differentials by legacy component; morale and engagement scored by legacy origin, not just by new org unit; cross-legacy versus within-legacy patterns in details, assignments, and promotions; qualification-portability disputes per season; resource-order friction at legacy seams; and we/they language frequency in AARs and reviews, sampled and coded. Each indicator carries the Piece-1 discipline — assumption, indicator, pre-decided response — so the register is a trip-wire set, not a dashboard. The baseline includes the Forest Service fire workforce even though it stands outside the service: if the second consolidation comes, its before-picture exists only now, and the two-baseline comparison is what will distinguish merger effects from background drift. This is the first-90-days action: a data call, not a program, and the only item in this COA that expires.

5.3 Draft the decision doctrine with all five cultures at the table. A common decision grammar — intent format, assumption and inflection-point vocabulary, briefing and critique formats, the trained frame-discipline of the companion analysis (Coil 2026b) — drafted by a working group representative of all five legacy cultures — including a Forest Service seat regardless of the second-stage decision, because the doctrine must work across the seam either way, and a grammar drafted without the largest culture's dialect will be experienced as foreign if that culture later joins — roster published, examples and vignettes audited for legacy-dialect dominance per Red Team 3.2. The doctrine standardizes grammar, never home-ground tactical answers; the document should say so in its first paragraph and mean it.

5.4 Install through the schoolhouse, not by memo. The doctrine enters the workforce at defined career gates — the Service's own courses at the thresholds where supervisors, division-level leaders, and command-level leaders are made — so that within a cohort-generation, every leader's formative professional experience includes a common crucible that is *Service* experience. This is the Cranwell mechanism at fire scale, and it is deliberately additive to, never a replacement for, the interagency incident assignments the dissent correctly defends. Existing convergence mechanisms — shared teams, cross-boundary assignments, common qualifications — are named in the culture owner's charter as protected assets.

5.5 Sequence against startup reality. Year one: owner named, baseline collected, drafting table seated. Administrative integration — pay, portability, housing — runs first and visibly, per Red Team 3.4; the culture line makes no claim on that bandwidth beyond the data call. Years two and three: doctrine ratified, first schoolhouse gates operating, register reporting annually against baseline. The RAF timeline is the honest expectation set for leadership: the substrate is installed in years, the culture matures in a generation, and the indicators register is what distinguishes patience from neglect across that span. If and when the second consolidation is decided, the sequence repeats at the seam — with one advantage the Interior four never had: the substrate can already be in place before the boxes move.

End state. A service whose legacy heritages — four today, five if the seam closes — remain intact and honored at home — and whose members, at every seam where the heritages meet, share one grammar for forming, briefing, and critiquing decisions under uncertainty. One patch, standing for the one thing everyone wearing it demonstrably shares.

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Culture cannot be declared.

The substrate it grows on can be chosen — and the window is open now.

The United States Wildland Fire Service consolidates the Interior Department's four wildland fire programs into one service; whether Forest Service fire crosses the departmental seam to join is the open second stage. The default future is the DHS outcome: administratively unified, culturally unmerged, twenty years on. The stakes are operational, not atmospheric — mission command runs on shared interpretive frames, and an agency without a common culture cannot command by intent. It can only centralize, one burned-finger memo at a time.

Heritage is unavailable as a substrate: the legacy heritages compete, and elevating one is conquest. What every culture can adopt without surrendering anything — across the departmental seam, before any second merger, and robust to that decision going either way — is a shared way of making decisions under uncertainty.

The analysis addresses both stages — the merger that has occurred and the one that may. It runs the mission-command dependency chain to its cultural foundation; reads the four merged cultures and the prospective fifth through local rationality, so no agency is the villain and none is the silent template; and tests the substrate hypothesis against three mergers — DHS, where structure plus time produced nothing and the bill arrived operationally at Katrina; SOCOM, which layered a joint identity of shared practice over intact component identities; and the RAF, which manufactured a third culture from two hostile parents through schools and career structure, and whose F by memo, and an indicators register that measures integration instead of asserting it — with the baseline collected in the standup year, while a baseline still exists to collect. leet Air Arm coda proves the mechanism in both directions.

The course of action gives the Service an owner for the problem, a decision doctrine drafted with all five cultures at the table, installation through the schoolhouse rather than by memo, and an indicators register that measures integration instead of asserting it — with the baseline collected in the standup year, while a baseline still exists to collect.

Flagship of a four-paper set in the Cogplexiti Systems & Decision Analysis line. Consumes The Second Skill as its mechanism; shares the assumption-indicator-response discipline of Order It and It Comes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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