The desire to regain a true conventional warfighting capability spurred the reorganization of Army divisions once again. In 1961, John F. Kennedy’s presidency brought with it the strategy of “flexible response,” a new policy crafted to reflect an evolved perception of the world’s security environment and assert how the United States would respond to disruptions in international security. Policymakers felt that the chances of general nuclear war breaking out were slim, while smaller brushfire and regional wars were much more likely. In capitalizing on this opportunity to become relevant once again, the Army proceeded to make its divisions much more flexible to reflect the range of potential missions it might be called upon to undertake. The ROAD (Reorganization Objectives, Army Divisions) division resulted from a study that “proposed standardized organization to facilitate training, and tactical and strategic tailoring, yet [would] be flexible enough to integrate new weapons and equipment as they became available.”

Essentially, the ROAD division was a return to the triangular structure of World War II and the Korean War and was greatly influenced by the qualities of the armored division combat commands. The significant difference here was that the ROAD divisional structure emphasized the concept of interchanging battalion-size combat maneuver units within and between divisions in the interest of easy task organization. Combat maneuver battalions were nearly identical organizationally while also being tactically and administratively

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1Hawkins, p. 42.
self-sufficient. This interchangeability also applied to personnel needs, as “similar assignments in all types of divisions needed to be standardized for efficient training and assignment of personnel.” Finally, the ROAD division solved the problem of the professional development of majors and lieutenant colonels by returning the battalion to the command hierarchy.2

Each ROAD division consisted of three brigades and assigned support units. These brigades did not possess subordinate battalions as in the past but were really highly flexible headquarters that would coordinate the actions of maneuver battalions and other support units of the division that were attached in accordance with a particular mission. It was intended that the brigade act solely as a tactical headquarters, controlling two to five maneuver battalions. The battalions would seek administrative support directly from the division and became the lowest level of tactical and administrative self-sufficiency. Other changes included the creation of a division support command, which put all technical and supply elements under one commander, and a significant increase in aviation assets.3

The different types of ROAD division possessed various combat maneuver battalion mixes (see Figure 5.1), with each type having about 15,000 men. The infantry division had eight infantry and two tank battalions; the armored division had six tank and five mechanized infantry battalions; the mechanized division had seven mechanized and three tank battalions; and the airborne division had nine airborne infantry battalions and one airborne gun battalion. In addition to these units, each ROAD division had a base consisting of four artillery battalions (three with 105-mm howitzers and one composite battalion of 155-mm and 8-inch howitzers; early ROAD designs also had a missile battalion armed with Honest John and Little John rockets), an armored cavalry squadron, a signal battalion, an engineer battalion, an aviation battalion, an MP company, and a division support command (DISCOM).4

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2 Ibid., pp. 42–45, 48.
3 Ibid., pp. 46–47.
The Airmobile Division (1965) and Vietnam

The ROAD division was to be the fighting organization that the Army employed in Vietnam, albeit in various forms, among which the airmobile variant would become the most notorious. After nearly two years of testing with the 11th Air Assault Division (Test), the airmobile concept was approved in late 1964 by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. McNamara had originally urged the study in 1962 intending to increase maneuverability by inserting more aircraft into Army formations. He instructed Army leaders to “examine their aviation requirements with a more audacious look at land warfare mobility.”\(^5\) McNamara was also aware of the pitfalls of the traditional service culture, so he wished to ensure that the Howze Board study from which the concept came was “divorced from traditional viewpoints and past policies, and free from veto or dilution by conservative staff review.”\(^6\) The airmobile division would give the Army the added dimension of vertical envelopment, intensifying the element of surprise and enabling much quicker reactions to enemy

\(^5\) Hawkins, p. 49.

\(^6\) Ibid.
movements. Organizationally, the airmobile division was essentially a ROAD division that differed in tactics and equipment: it had more than 450 aircraft and only 1,100 tracked and wheeled vehicles, while a typical ROAD division had about 100 aircraft and 3,400 vehicles.7

In 1965, the Army first adopted this modified ROAD organizational structure for the new 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), taking better advantage of transport and attack helicopters. It seemed to be better-suited to the lower-intensity warfare of the thickly forested, mountainous terrain of Vietnam, which lacked an extensive road system. The airmobile concept would eventually influence much of the rest of the Army throughout the war and into the present day in the form of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) and every other division’s aviation brigade. At the time, it was believed that fighting the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army required a quick, mobile, and powerful force that shocked the enemy with tremendous speed and firepower, from which they would not be able to recover. Putting troops and fire support in rapid, highly mobile vehicles—helicopters—helped the division to achieve heretofore unimaginable levels of maneuverability. The Army was able to kill large numbers of enemy soldiers, but ultimately this was not enough to attain victory and save the government of South Vietnam.

The Army’s airmobile division was certainly a boon for mobility—surprising the enemy with tremendous and sudden force—but it was not without its shortcomings.8 Depending on helicopters for most movement and transport, it was often either too heavy, loud, and cumbersome, or it lacked sufficient firepower and protection. Then as now, helicopters were noisy, vulnerable to small-arms fire, and required enormous logistical support. Additionally, the airmobile division of the time lacked organic armor and medium artillery and thus had to rely on corps artillery, the Air Force, or Navy for heavy fire support. Nevertheless, as mobile and destructive as the new airmobile force proved to be, it still was not flexible enough to defeat a foe that used a variety of warfare styles. The enemy would sometimes engage U.S. forces in conventional formations but would fre-

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7Ibid., pp. 49–51.

8The Army’s other nonairmobile ROAD-based divisions, a majority of those deployed in Vietnam, do not seem to have fared appreciably better or worse.
quentely shift to smaller dispersed harassing groups that could escape destruction. U.S. units were then often sized to better hunt for the elusive enemy. Indeed, records indicate that U.S. units engaged the enemy in company-size elements or smaller a large majority of the time, leading one to speculate whether the division was an appropriate fundamental organizational design for combat in Vietnam.9 Certainly, questions about Army strategy and doctrine and the larger national strategy, as well as the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government, are at least as important as organizational design when evaluating Army performance in Vietnam.

Vietnam-era Army divisions were essentially a product of World War II combat requirements and experience, appropriate for the attrition of an obvious, heavily armed enemy in open slugfests. These large, heavy forces primarily designed for employment in the forests and farmlands of Europe proved to be ill-suited to the type of fighting found in Vietnam. Perhaps this should have had implications for force design. Although failure in Vietnam should not be blamed on division organization and design, a structure that could better support smaller group tactics—capable of defending the South Vietnamese population and territory—might have been more effective in the end. A division-based force designed for mid-intensity conflict against a conventional army might not have been appropriate for the often low-intensity, jungle-terrain insurgency warfare found in Vietnam.10

The Triple Capability Division: TRICAP

In the early 1970s, the 1st Cavalry Division was briefly reorganized into an experimental division that combined substantial armor, mechanized infantry, airmobile infantry, and air cavalry assets to evaluate their interaction while simultaneously filling the role of an armored division in the strategic reserve.11 Possessing triple

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capabilities, it was commonly called TRICAP. When originally stood up in 1971, the TRICAP division possessed a ROAD design variation notable for its armor, airmobile, and air cavalry combat brigade (ACCB) headquarters, which would command three tank, three infantry, one mechanized infantry, and one aviation battalions and an air cavalry squadron. By the end of 1972, an armor brigade headquarters, one tank battalion, and one mechanized infantry battalion were added, while airmobile assets were reduced and subsumed into the ACCB. The ACCB embodied many of the latest innovations that had been tested in Vietnam and Europe and was employed as a combined arms assault unit. Some saw the ACCB primarily as an integrated antiarmor brigade, while others envisioned it as a balanced, versatile organization that could undertake a variety of missions. Nevertheless, the presence of an overwhelming Soviet armored force in Europe pressed the case for a long-range antiarmor capability that could disrupt an enemy advance. Eventually, the ACCB’s utility was proved but deemed appropriate at corps echelon. At the same time, with only six ground maneuver battalions, it was felt that TRICAP simply did not possess the ability to gain and hold ground on a European battlefield. Subsequently, in 1974, the 1st Cavalry Division was reorganized as an armored division, and in 1975, its ACCB stood up as a separate formation.12

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