

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

2005

## Book Review: Austin, Cleared for Takeoff: Aviators, Businessmen, and the Growth of an American City

Roger Bilstein

*University of Houston-Clear Lake*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Bilstein, Roger, "Book Review: Austin, Cleared for Takeoff: Aviators, Businessmen, and the Growth of an American City" (2005). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 163.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/163>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

ested in finding rapid forms of travel to the far-flung cities and counties of the rest of the state. Thus, Ragsdale's book touches on a highly relevant aspect of urban as well as regional history. Moreover, as national and international travel became accepted for business as well as pleasure, the role of airlines and airports serving Austin took on a growing immediacy.

There is considerable attention to statistics in Ragsdale's book—summaries of acreages acquired for airfields, numbers of passengers, dollars allocated for bonds, and so on—but always introduced as integral aspects of the story at hand. Rather than clutter the book to no good end, these numbers add to our appreciation of the debates surrounding aviation, airports, expansion plans, essential planning, and similar issues. The positions of mayors, city councils, neighborhood committees, and individuals (objective as well as self-interested) are all carefully analyzed and evaluated.

Ragsdale begins the story with pre-World War I flights that took adventurous fliers across the state in order to take advantage of (generally) good flying weather and (generally) flyable terrain. Consequently, the University of Texas became a center for instruction and flight training during the Great War. This phenomenon had important long-term consequences for building a sound infrastructure for civil as well as military aviation, and Ragsdale makes this a fascinating story. Subsequently, he explains the evolution of air mail and passenger service, with colorful descriptions of the equally colorful characters who occupied the aviation scene between the wars. World War II brought a renewal of military aviation influences to Austin, especially in terms of Bergstrom Air Force base. As the city struggled during the 1980s and 1990s to accommodate a rising tide of airline passengers, the complex events that led to the creation of Austin-Bergstrom International Airport in the wake of military base closures of the 1990s make for a fascinating case study.

Along the way, Ragsdale does a particularly fine job of assessing general aviation (personal and corporate flying) and its practitioners.

*Austin, Cleared for Takeoff: Aviators, Businessmen, and the Growth of an American City.* By Kenneth B. Ragsdale. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. xiii + 270 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

At its widest point, Texas measures some 850 miles across. El Paso, in the extreme west, is closer to Los Angeles than it is to Texarkana, sited near the state's eastern boundary. Given the distances its citizens have to travel, Texas has always been attuned to transport technology. And people living in the capital, Austin, near the state's center, have always been inter-

Altogether, this first-rate study will interest twentieth century historians, as well as those with special interests in business, urban, transportation, and state and regional history.

ROGER BILSTEIN  
Department of History, Emeritus  
University of Houston-Clear Lake