Chair’s Speaker Series

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George W. Bush
An American Tragedy

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4:00 – 5:30 p.m.
Upper Library, Massey College
(4 Devonshire Place)

George W. Bush may not have been America's worst president—the jury is still out, but he bears primary responsibility for most of the problems the United States confronts today. He overreacted to 9/11, and he should never have invaded Iraq. The events of 9/11 are tragic, but did not warrant the violation of civil liberties that followed, the blank check given to NSA to invade the privacy Americans enjoy, nor the enhanced interrogation procedures employed by the CIA. Bush's decision to invade Iraq was even worse. Saddam Hussein may have been a ruthless dictator, but he kept the lid on violent extremists and was no threat to the United States. There was no ISIS under Saddam, and no weapons of mass destruction. By attacking Iraq and overthrowing Saddam Hussein, Bush upset the delicate equilibrium between Shiites and Sunnis that existed in the Middle East. The casualties and the cost—estimated in excess of three trillion dollars—have been enormous. But even worse is the continued instability of the region. Bush wanted to bring democracy to Iraq. That was naïve given the deep sectarian, ethnic, and tribal fissures that existed. What he achieved was to spawn the continuing insurrection that is led today by ISIS fundamentalists. George W. Bush may not have been America's worst president, but his decision to invade Iraq is the worst foreign policy decision ever made by an American president. Most studies of the Bush presidency emphasize the roles played by Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Rice. Bush is often seen as a figurehead. That is incorrect. After 9/11 Bush, as commander in chief, assumed direct control of all aspects of American policy. The decisions were his, and he was in total control. As a born-again Christian, Bush saw issues in terms of black and white. There were no subtleties and no shades of grey. The fights against al-Qaeda and Iraq were biblical struggles of good versus evil—something from the pages of the Book of Revelation, and Bush was God's agent. He expected his cabinet to fall into line, not debate policy alternatives. BUSH is a full-length biography of the forty-third president. His family heritage, childhood in Texas, Andover, Yale, the Harvard Business School, Air National Guard, his exposure to the oil business, and the Texas Rangers are treated extensively. At Harvard Business School, Bush was regarded by his classmates as "dynamically ignorant," and is one of the few graduates not to have a job offer when he completed his studies. His personal life was often unglued. He drank too much and was no stranger to prohibited substances. An unsuccessful run for Congress in 1978 caused him to hesitate about entering politics. His fortuitous marriage to Laura Welch, and his re-entry into life as a born-again Christian in 1985, brought him back to the straight and narrow. His upset defeat of Texas governor Ann Richards in 1994 returned him to political life.