The war in Afghanistan has already yielded two very positive results for human rights: the overthrow of the Taliban regime in that country, and the almost certain disruption and disabling of al-Qaida as a functioning terrorist organization. It is proper to acknowledge the beneficial impact of these results, although I had serious doubts, at the time, about the wisdom of going to war over the events of September 11, 2001.

From the perspective of the promotion and defense of universal human rights, the short-term gains resulting from the demise of the Taliban and al-Qaida may come at the expense of serious setbacks in the future. Of course, this is not necessarily the way things will turn out, but it is important to start looking at the long-term ill effects of the present war effort in order to reverse them or, at least, to minimize their impact.

First and foremost, the United States must hold its military operations to the same standards that it uses when criticizing violations of the laws of war by others. There have been several worrisome complaints about deaths among the civilian population, and the Pentagon seems to be dismissing these complaints without a serious public investigation. It may well be that each one of the incidents reported by credible human-rights monitors is “collateral damage,” in the sense of unwanted and unpreventable civilian casualties in otherwise legitimate military actions. But labeling them so in response to the first question asked about such civilian
If in the future, the United States wishes to continue to be a leader of the international community’s efforts to uphold democracy, human rights and the rule of law around the world, what we do against terrorism today, in response to our own tragedy, cannot be divorced from that goal.