Do we owe the French and other Europeans a second look when it comes to their willingness to exercise power in today's world? Was it really fair for some to call the French and other Europeans "cheese-eating surrender monkeys?" Is it time to restore the French in "French fries" at the Congressional dining room, and stop calling them "Freedom Fries?" Why do I ask these profound questions?

Because we are once again having one of those big troop debates: Do we send more forces to Afghanistan, and are we ready to do what it takes to "win" there? This argument will be framed in many ways, but you can set your watch on these chest-thumpers: "toughness," "grit," "fortitude," "willingness to do whatever it takes to realize big stakes" — all the qualities we tend to see in ourselves, with some justification, but not in Europeans.

But are we really that tough? If the metric is a willingness to send troops to Iraq and Afghanistan and consider the use of force against Iran, the answer is yes. And we should be eternally grateful to the Americans willing to go off and fight those fights. But in another way — when it comes to doing things that would actually weaken the people we are sending our boys and girls to fight — we are total wimps. We are, in fact, so wimpy our politicians are afraid to even talk about how wimpy we are.

How so? France today generates nearly 80 percent of its electricity from nuclear power plants, and it has managed to deal with all the radioactive waste issues without any problems or panics. And us? We get about 20 percent and have not been able or willing to build one new nuclear plant since the Three Mile Island accident in 1979, even though that accident led to no deaths or injuries to plant workers or neighbors. We're too afraid to store nuclear waste deep in Nevada's Yucca Mountain — totally safe — at a time when French mayors clamor to have reactors in their towns to create jobs. In short, the French stayed the course on clean nuclear power, despite Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, and we ran for cover.

How about Denmark? Little Denmark, sweet, never-hurt-a-fly Denmark, was hit hard by the 1973 Arab oil embargo. In 1973, Denmark got all its oil from the Middle East. Today? Zero. Why? Because Denmark got tough. It imposed on itself a carbon tax, a roughly $5-a-gallon gasoline tax, made massive investments in energy efficiency and in systems to generate energy from waste, along with a discovery of North Sea oil (about 40 percent of its needs).

And us? When it comes to raising gasoline taxes or carbon taxes — at a perfect time like this when prices are already low — our politicians tell us it is simply "off the table." So I repeat, who is the real tough guy here?

"The first rule of warfare is: 'Take the high ground.' Even the simplest Taliban fighter knows that," said David Rothkopf, energy consultant and author of "Superclass." "The strategic high ground in the world — whether it is in the Middle East or vis-à-vis difficult countries like Russia and Venezuela — is to be less dependent on oil. And yet, we simply refuse to seize it."

According to the energy economist Phil Verleger, a $1 tax on gasoline and diesel fuel would raise about $140 billion a year. If I had that money, I'd devote 45 cents of each dollar to pay down the deficit and satisfy the debt hawks, 45 cents to pay for new health care and 10 cents to cushion the burden of such a tax on the poor and on those who need to drive long distances.

Such a tax would make our economy healthier by reducing the deficit, by stimulating the renewable energy industry, by strengthening the dollar through shrinking oil imports and by helping to shift the burden of health care away from business to government so our companies can compete better globally. Such a tax would make our population healthier by expanding health care and reducing emissions. Such a tax would make our national-security healthier by shrinking our dependence on oil from countries that have drawn a bull's-eye on our backs and by increasing our leverage over petro-dictators, like those in Iran, Russia and Venezuela, through shrinking their oil incomes.

In sum, we would be physically healthier, economically healthier and strategically healthier. And yet, amazingly, even talking about such a tax is "off the table" in Washington. You can't mention it. But sending your neighbor's son or daughter to risk their lives in Afghanistan? No problem. Talk away. Pound your chest.

I am not sure what the right troop number is for Afghanistan; I need to hear more. But I sure know this: There is something wrong when our country is willing to consider spending more lives and treasure in Afghanistan, where winning is highly uncertain, but can't even talk about a gasoline tax, which is win, win, win, win, win — with no uncertainty at all.

So, I ask yet again: Who are the real cheese-eating surrender monkeys in this picture?

Nicholas D. Kristof is off today.