Thomas Friedman writes (Real Men Tax Gas, September 19) that France has “managed to deal with all the radioactive waste issues without any problems or panics.”

This unsubstantiated claim is worse than an understatement. It is 100% untrue.

The French have no operating radioactive waste repository – just a faulty and controversial hole in the ground in the village of Bure.

Most French waste sits at the La Hague reprocessing facility on the Normandy Coast, including 81 metric tons of plutonium in thousands of soda-sized canisters. One hundred million gallons of liquid radioactive waste resulting from reprocessing are discharged each year into the English Channel, contaminating waters as far as the Arctic. There are well documented cancer clusters along the Normandy coast near La Hague. The krypton gas released by La Hague has traveled across the globe.

Much French reactor waste is too contaminated to reprocess. Some plutonium is retrieved and “reused” in reactors that produce more waste containing about the same amount of plutonium. This waste cannot be reprocessed and has nowhere to go.

In this country, every reactor ordered since 1973 has been canceled. The brakes came on before Three Mile Island and remain on today for a myriad of good reasons, not the least being the immense cost of building a reactor. Conservative estimates are around $12 billion apiece but no one really knows how much higher the price could get. Wall Street isn’t buying so U.S. taxpayers are being asked to shoulder the inevitable debt.

When the Chernobyl reactor exploded, the French government lied to its people and said the plume would not cross the border into France. The French took no precautionary measures, unlike their European counterparts. As a consequence, an independent French scientific laboratory has mapped radioactive hot spots the length of the country’s eastern perimeter. Today, 840 French anti-nuclear groups are a testament to the level of suspicion felt in that country toward its so-called nuclear success story.

Refusing to follow the French nuclear example isn’t “wimpy.” It’s the only responsible choice to make.

Sincerely,

Linda Gunter, co-founder, Beyond Nuclear.