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# Why France Went Nuclear

August 6th, 2014 by [Jake Richardson](#)

France's choice to invest heavily in nuclear, many don't seem to be aware, was based on the fact that the country had very little in the way of its own energy resources such as coal, oil, and gas. It was hit particularly hard by the oil crisis of 1973 when the price of oil soared. At that time, most of France's electricity was generated by power plants that burned imported oil.



In America, it was the excessive cost of gas that seemed to be the main point of shock. Long lines at gas stations resulted in frustration, fear, and confusion. For France, one could argue the effect was more harrowing because oil prices quadrupled, yet foreign oil was needed to provide most of the electricity for the country.

Nuclear power was an attractive option because the fuel was not nearly as volatile, and a solution to the over-reliance on oil was very much needed. From 1974 to 1989, France launched a highly aggressive nuclear power development program.

Today, France has 59 nuclear reactors providing about 78% of its electricity. It is also the leading exporter of nuclear energy in the EU. One might say France took a huge gamble and it appears it won big.

The first generation nuclear reactors were built in the 1950s; the second generation in the 1970s. (Chernobyl and Three Mile Island were second-generation plants.) Third-generation plants were designed in the 1990s. **Fourth-generation** plants are the ones designed today. The latest generation has been designed to solve the safety issues associated with the older generations.

"It is technically impossible for them to have a runaway chain reaction. No accident, failure or human carelessness could produce mass radiation. No matter what mistakes the operators make, the power station is inherently safe," explained James Martin, in [The Meaning of the 21st Century: A Vital Blueprint for Ensuring Our Future](#).

In 2011, a [study](#) found that many nuclear plants in France needed enhanced safety measures to cope with natural disasters like the earthquake that caused the Fukushima plant problems.

Of course, there are critics, and some are more vocal, like Greenpeace, but nuclear power appears to have been most successful in France and today its nuclear industry employs about [400,000](#).

That said, there is a strong move away from nuclear and toward renewables in France. The high price of new nuclear power plants, retiring nuclear power plants, low renewable energy costs, and nuclear's inflexibility (slow start-up and shut-down times) are all at play here. Of course, a more liberal government has also been pushing for the switch.

Image Credit: [nuclear power plant](#) via Shutterstock

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