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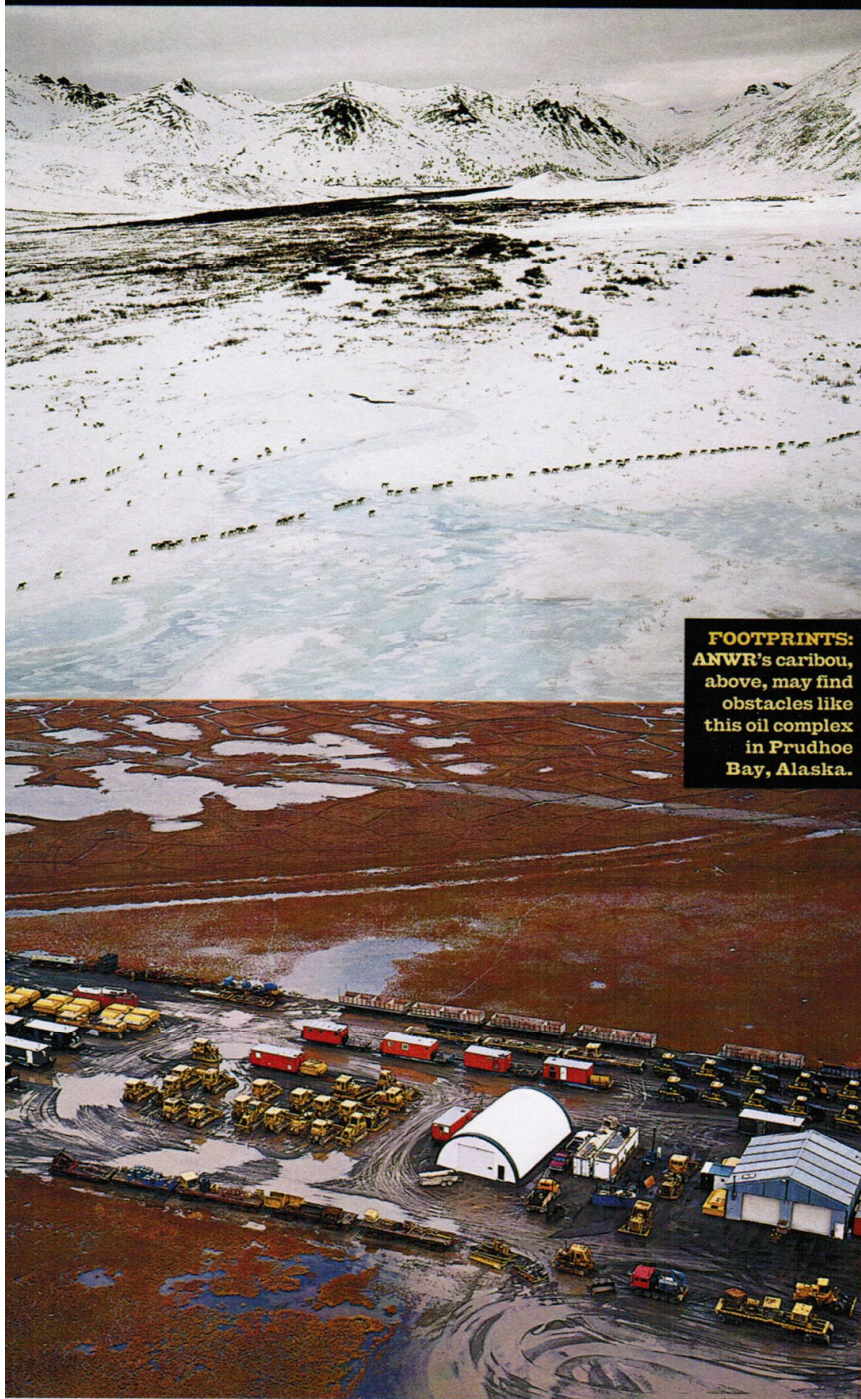
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FOOTPRINTS:
ANWR's caribou, above, may find obstacles like this oil complex in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska.

Arctic Smackdown

Does President Bush have the votes to drill Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge? The world is about to find out.

COME MID-FEBRUARY, Congress will launch into a new round of debate over drilling for oil in Alaska's 19.6-million-acre Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). For environmentalists, who have made ANWR the biggest issue since the loss of Utah's Glen Canyon, in 1963, the stakes couldn't be higher—and the odds have never been worse. The image of 120,000 Porcupine caribou arriving

at the refuge's coastal plain—known as Section 1002—to find their calving grounds a maze of roads and pipelines could become a harsh reality.

For the first time in this 25-year fight, drilling advocates may have an unbeatable hand. After a presidential election with almost no environmental debate, stunned conservationists face a Republican juggernaut that seems to have the congressional votes to tap the estimated 4.3 to 11.8 billion barrels of 1002 crude, only a portion of which can be recovered at a profit.

The issue will likely be decided in the Senate, where the GOP is expected to make ANWR drilling part of the filibuster-proof budget process, allowing passage with a simple majority. This is the same strategy Republicans adopted in 2003, but it failed when an amendment to strip ANWR language from the bill—sponsored by California Democrat Barbara Boxer and supported by eight Republicans, including Arizona's John McCain—passed by just two votes. As the numbers stand now, such an amendment would probably fail by an even wider margin.

Even so, the anti-drilling camp is not ready to fold. Strategists from the Natural Resources Defense Council and other environmental groups insist that some senators expected to support drilling are open to persuasion. Fourteen will be up for reelection in 2006, and, despite Republican declarations of a mandate, many red-state voters support a moderate conservation agenda. This past November, residents in heavily Republican Montana resoundingly voted against construction of job-creating cyanide mines, and across the country, 75 percent of 161 environmental ballot measures passed, dedicating \$3.25 billion for land conservation.

Still, with the nation focused on war and the economy, refuge defenders may have to hope for a rescue—a decision, say, by the new chair of the Senate Budget Committee, New Hampshire Republican Judd Gregg, against including ANWR, since it could derail the budget. Congress might also fail to agree on a budget at all, for reasons that have nothing to do with oil. (That has happened in three of the past seven years.)

If the measure does pass, exploratory wells could be dug by next winter. Environmentalists will likely file lawsuits hoping to delay full-on drilling long enough for another election to send the pendulum back the other way. But if those court battles fail, the Porcupine caribou may soon be raising their young in the shadows of steel pipes.

—MICHAEL ROBERTS AND JASON STEVENSON