ANWR'S OIL, or *THE SLIPPERY NORTH SLOPE*

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Imagine, if you will, that you have been given the responsibility of designing a community, of laying out where the residential areas and schools should be, where industry would best be placed, where to site central and peripheral commercial zones, which scenic resources to reserve for recreation and as natural preserves. You have the advantage of foresight and the opportunity to be wise. How do you balance these resources, if potential uses overlap and conflict? What choices should you make?

To look at this question another way, what relative values do these various activities of society possess? This question of real estate allocation belongs to the same family as those of whether to work late or spend time with the kids, of what kind of career to choose, of the value of the arts, of what to teach in schools --- indeed, of the meaning of life. When potential uses – of land, or of time, or of personal energy -- conflict, should one necessarily be given priority over another? Specifically, is it always wise to defer to monetary values, as if we do, indeed, live by bread alone?

Of course, in real life we rarely have the opportunity to make these kinds of land use decisions. People move into a new area, stake their claims in the most advantageous spots, and go about making a living. Development isn't always driven by a planning commission's vision of a future larger community. The first to come are, understandably, first-served; day-to-day decisions are essentially always made with the present in mind; and money talks.

It is my purpose tonight to assess this dilemma, the inevitable choice between values of the heart (values spiritual and aesthetic) and values economic, as it applies to the debate over whether to drill for oil on the north shore of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge or to preserve that dedicated wilderness from commercial development. It is my hope to raise this discussion, at least for a time, above the rhetoric of entrenched partisan politics. I have my bias, and it will probably become obvious, but, in truth, these issues are always difficult. In our real world, conflicting values are also all very real. In the end, our choices reflect our values. Everything, as we know, is a faith issue.

We run on oil. Oh, we run on coal and gas and water, too. But oil fuels our cars and trucks and tractors and fires a major piece of our productive economy. Our modern American sense of independence may reside more in our gas-powered cars than in our democracy or our legal freedoms. Oil nurtures and greases the economic and psychological unity of our nation. Without oil, our lives would literally grind to a halt.

Oil drew Hitler into Russia, and Japan into southeast Asia, and Bush into Iraq. The world's next war may very well be fought over the control of oil resources. Traditional military might depends on oil supply. The ownership of oil and oil reserves equates to gigantic power and wealth. Our country's slide into the recession of two decades ago, and our subsequent economic recovery, followed OPEC's powerful squeeze

and subsequent collapsing release of oil supply. Oil is the world's commercial axis. Nations with oil are the Haves, those without are the Have-Nots.

Twenty-seven years ago, when I waited in long lines for rationed tanks of gas, I was convinced that the world's – and my own personal – supply of oil would be exhausted in ten or maybe twenty years. We understand that this fossil fuel is finite in supply. But the economic incentives to discover and extract oil from under the ground and sea are enormous. No spot on earth has been ignored in this pursuit. Fabulous technology has been invested in the procurement of oil. We know now that there is ample petroleum to supply humanity for many decades, even with rising population and living standards. The crippling shortages which may occur will arise from corporate or governmental tomfoolery or skullduggery, rather than from actual scarcity. But oil has grown harder and harder to find, and more and more expensive to mine.

We have no ready substitute for oil and gasoline. It has taken a quarter-century for a useful battery-powered car to reach the market. The fuel-efficiency of our vehicles hasn't improved in a generation. Alternative energy sources stand ignored in the shadows, like wallflowers at a high school dance. Vested oil interests, of course, have retarded the development of competition; but cheaply available oil has made other options appear luxuriously expensive, too.

Americans make up 5% of the world's population, but gobble up 25% of the world's energy. We consume about 6.7 billion barrels of oil a year. Of that, 51% is imported; the Energy Information Agency estimates that foreign oil will comprise 64% of U. S. consumption by 2020. OPEC controls 40% of world oil production. Major sources are in the Middle East, Mexico and South America, Indonesia, and Russia. A new trove has been discovered under Afghanistan's Caspian Sea. American diplomatic interests shadow our heavy economic interest in these black-gold centers.

To the degree that the United States is must depend on other nations, like Iraq or Russia or Iran or Saudi Arabia, for our supply of the oil we need, we are vulnerable. Our economy is vulnerable if the leaders of other nations can limit our access to the oil which drives our economy. If we should be short of oil, the costs of oil would rise and some parts of society would likely have to do without. Escalating oil costs and oil shortages would ripple their effects throughout all branches of our economy; we have only to remember two decades ago to recall the monstrous interest rates and the industrial recession that slid out the back end of the OPEC oil embargo. Our military strength can be similarly held hostage by a constricted oil supply.

It is in this economic atmosphere of our own need and desire for oil and competition for the supply of oil that attention has become focused again on the northeast corner of Alaska. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), created by Congress in 1980, has survived previous attempts to open its northern slope to oil drilling. The refuge encompasses 19 million acres of rugged absolute wilderness. It extends from the shore of the Arctic Ocean southward over the Brooks Mountain Range and the rolling tundra and forests to the Yukon River valley, and from the Canadian border 160 miles westward. It

is the home of the grizzly bear, caribou, eagle, lynx, wolverine, polar bear, musk ox, migrating birds, and arctic grayling. Not even logging roads penetrate. A hardy visitor here knows that this is not man's domain. His presence is temporary, and when he leaves life will go on as if he'd never been there.

The Prudhoe Bay oil field, America's largest producer of crude, throbs busily on Alaska's north slope only 65 miles west of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge boundary. Prudhoe lights up the tundra for miles with its yellow industrial light, steam belches from plants eight stories high, flames shoot from natural-gas flares, and house-sized bulldozers grind back and forth along 500 miles of roads linking 170 drilling sites along the coast. The Alaska Pipeline stretches south from Prudhoe Bay 900 miles to Prince William Sound on Alaska's southern shore, carrying crude to Valdez, where tankers fill up for voyages to distant refineries. On the way, pumping stations push the petroleum over mountains, tundra, forests, and marshlands. The oil industry has become Alaska's bonanza, as it did in Texas. Alaska's oil industry dominates the state economy and politics. Those who have invested in and gained from Alaskan oil are loudly in favor of more of the same. Other Alaskans, who feel their lives have been impoverished by Alaskan oil, speak of their losses in terms of non-material values.

ANWR's geology appears to be something of a continuation of the Prudhoe territory on its western shoulder. The U. S. Geological Survey estimates that 3.2 billion barrels of economically recoverable oil underlie ANWR's northern slope, enough oil to supply U. S. needs for a six-month period, some years from now. The oil industry has its own, much higher, estimates of ANWR's hidden riches --- 16 billion barrels. A new oil boom would generate taxes and fees for state and federal governments. Oil exploration and service firms like Halliburton, Richard Cheney's old company, have been poised for years to drill and pump in the wildlife refuge. With George W. Bush's accession to the presidency, the pressure to rescind the federal commitment to the preservation of the ANWR wilderness has become intense.

Wilderness advocates counter that we, as a society, have critical need to preserve lands such as ANWR. ANWR is uniquely valuable. Nowhere else do we have such an intact, protected, natural wilderness. Nowhere else in the United States do we have a wild territory potentially able to successfully live into the future, safe from the inevitable pollution of human and industrial traffic. Nowhere else do we have the chance to ensure the continuation of caribou herds, polar bears and grizzlies.

The culture of the native Gwich'in people of northeast Alaska depends on the undisturbed wilderness of ANWR, and particularly on the Porcupine caribou herd. These caribou migrate annually to the Arctic coastal flatlands of the north slope of the Brooks Range, where their young are born and nursed, safe from predators, before heading south across the mountains again in the early fall. Native Eskimo peoples have seen disruption of the caribou herd in the pipeline territory, and fear ruination of their way of life in northeast Alaska.

Oil exploitation proponents argue that a Prudhoe-like development on ANWR's north slope would not damage the wilderness. Environmentally-sensitive drilling, pumping, and pipeline development could be accomplished without significantly impacting the caribou birthing grounds and migrations. Oil industry advocates contend that the caribou herds in the pipeline territory west of ANWR have continued to be healthy. We'd be able to have our oil and our wildlife refuge, too, they say.

But, respond wilderness advocates, the question is not *how much* development of ANWR oil fields the wilderness could withstand; *any* permanent human invasion, they explain, destroys wilderness. It's not possible to be "half-pregnant." Wilderness isn't an area of parkland integrated with modern industrial Americana; it's wild country without us, except as respectful visitors. ANWR has this problem: most Americans, natives of urban living, have no personal experience with wilderness, or even with any natural setting other than sidewalked, trampled, and littered urban parks. What appreciation has a New Guinea highland primitive for the internet? How can a corporate urbanite, or a career beltway operative, understand and appreciate the spiritual value of wilderness? Nevertheless, argue wilderness advocates, we have, as a society, spiritual *need* for wild places where the natural order perseveres, where our respect for God's creation is valued more than whatever economic values might reside there.

Our discussion has so far assumed our continuing and vital need for an oil supply to meet our demands. In the short term, it's hard to argue with this position. We have no ready alternative to gasoline and diesel for our vehicles. On the other hand, we are not currently faced with any crisis of oil scarcity. Our concerns about dependence on foreign oil are medium-term concerns, in order to be ready for an adverse turn of events. For now, the United States will continue to consume a very large portion of the world's marketed oil, with no change in pattern or policy.

But there are reasons, strong reasons, long-term reasons, to consider reducing our present pattern and policy of oil consumption. The first is, ironically, the same reason given for expanding our exploration for and procurement of oil: the degree to which our escalating oil consumption outstrips our own domestic oil production. Our pace of oil use far surpasses even the most optimistic projections of our potential domestic production of oil. Instead of prioritizing domestic oil development, we might be wiser to prioritize reduced dependency on oil.

The second long-term reason to reconsider our continuing investment in oil-dependence is the damage which our gasoline-burning vehicles and oil-burning furnaces are wreaking on the air and water of our own country. We are all familiar with smog and air-pollution respiratory alerts and acid rain. Even aside from the sibling pollution contributions of coal and natural gas, our combustion of petroleum products is seriously degrading our quality of life. In concert with coal and gas, our monumental oil combustion are driving our nation into a short-term *and* long-term pollution crisis.

The third reason for the United States to contemplate developing something other than oil-dependent energy production is the world's rapidly worsening environmental

mess. While the world's global temperature has risen at a rate remarkable in geological history, in direct relation to our burning of fossil fuels and to our consequent accumulation of atmospheric carbon dioxide, we have seen a correspondingly predictable destabilization of the world's climate, with a proliferation of catastrophic storms. This is a short-term problem. The long-range outlook of global warming, as we know, is much more dire --- deepening droughts, devastating floods, rampaging storms, famine, pestilence, economic collapse, societal chaos.

In the meantime, the ***economic*** consequences of continuing oil- and coal-burning may really be much worse than the costs of change. We've historically thought of disastrous storms and droughts as "acts of God." Soft propaganda has led us to think of environmental pollution as a "tree-hugger's" concern. But the economic costs of man-made air pollution and global warming are very real, and are mushrooming. These issues very much do belong in any discussion of the expansion of our oil industry, and belong in the debate about ANWR's oil.

This last point neatly returns us to our starting point, to the relative wisdom of making societal decisions based on economic value alone --- "What yields the greater profit? Can we afford the cost?" --- without considering the importance of other competing values --- "What determines quality of life? What determines the success of a society? What, as people, do we seek in life?" A materialist's view of the ANWR dilemma might be, "We have to be concerned about the environment, but we must also be 'realistic'." Another statement of the issue might be, "We have to be concerned about our dependence on foreign oil, but we must also be '*realistic*'."

Ral Donner, a wannabe Elvis of the early sixties, sang, "You don't know what you've got, until you lose it." Former oil executives George W. Bush and Richard Cheney insist that the United States needs ANWR's oil. The noted American theologian -environmentalist, Dr. Dewey Care, has said: "ANWR belongs to all of us. We have one chance to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and we must succeed in that chance every day if we hope for its future, because the economic lure of its oil will make it forever vulnerable."

2001: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change declares that global warming is real and also man-made. 1990's were the warmest decade on record. Future changes now predicted to be twice as severe as predicted 5 years ago.

Just as there is no way to be "half-pregnant", there is no "sensitive" way to drill in a wilderness.

Alternatives: 1. Double the gas-efficiency of vehicles; 2. Battery-powered cars.

Due to the accelerating shift away from energy-hungry heavy manufacturing toward more fuel-efficient high-tech and services industries, the U. S. is currently about half as dependent on oil as it was in the early 1970's.

The inflation-adjusted price of gasoline is half of what it was 20 years ago.

Natural gas accounts for 25% of U. S. overall energy needs.

China: 73% coal-energized. 300-year coal supply (present consumption rate). China has become the world's 2nd-largest greenhouse-gas polluter. China will triple its coal consumption by 2020, becoming the #1 greenhouse-gas polluter.