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Special Report: The Alaska-Hawaii connection (Part One)

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Just hours before the war in Iraq officially began on March 19, the Boxer Amendment stripped a provision from the budget bill that would have allowed drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). So close was the race that Vice President Cheney went up to the hill in anticipation of casting the tie-breaking vote. But what had been a tense, one vote race, turned into a 52 to 48 victory for the environmentalists at the eleventh hour, disappointing oil industry advocates who have poured millions into lobbying Congress to open the Refuge.

Had the President announced the beginning of the war the day before, it;s still unlikely the amendment would have succeeded. An identical provision in the House version of the bill failed on April 11, 247 to 175, leaving incentives in the bill for oil companies who want to drill in the Refuge. Presently, the full Senate is deliberating S.14, a bill that contains the Native American Energy Development and Self-Determination Act of 2003, a section of which waives the federal government's liability for regulating agreements between tribes and energy companies. As the Senate continues to deliberate President Bush's energy policies, and debates about the value of oil ensue, it will become increasingly difficult to keep drilling out of the Refuge. Advocates are likely to position themselves around any of a number of valid questions, such as how can we justify risking American lives in the Middle East to secure that region's oil reserves without being willing to drill the wells dry in our own back yard?

This story is about that untapped oil at the top of the world and its connection to the

little known Native Hawaiian Federal Recognition Bill, referred to as the Akaka Bill. It's a peek behind the curtain of how the Alaska oil industry's efforts have secretly stepped into the Hawaiian community to secure Senator Akaka's support for drilling in the Refuge. And it's about how a multi-national Alaska Native corporation, flush with oil money and tied to Senator Akaka, has tried to convince the Hawaiian people to simultaneously oppose the Gwich'in people, who are fighting to keep drilling out of the Refuge, and accept the Akaka Bill.

That bill could ultimately leave the Hawaiians as politically powerless as the Gwich'in, whose political status is "Indigenous," a legal term used in this case to define Aboriginal peoples who are nationals of the country they are surrounded by. As a federally recognized tribe, the Gwich'in are subject to the plenary powers of Congress. The United States' classification of Hawaiians and how that would affect their political future is part of the debate over federal recognition legislation that seeks to define them as "Native Americans." Among Hawaiians who oppose the bill, such a definition is viewed as an attempt to extinguish the dual political status Hawaiians have as Aboriginal people and citizens of an occupied, independent nation state that was illegally annexed by the U.S. in 1898.

Connections between what is happening with the Gwich'in people, and what may happen with Hawaiians should they choose to go the way of federal recognition, don't end with the plenary powers of Congress or Senator Akaka's vote on drilling. Hawaiians and Gwich'in actually have another critical link in common: that being how Alaska's oil industry has, via the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement, influenced Hawaiian politics on the issue of the Akaka Bill. The answer to why this connects the Gwich'in struggle to keep drilling out of the Refuge, with Hawaiian debates over the Akaka Bill, is manifesting itself in the form of who has power over federal dollars for Hawaiians and who is pressuring them to accept federal recognition.

(Continued in Part Two)

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