

## Thinning Ice

**T**here has been no end of scholarly studies confirming the gradual rise in global temperatures over the past century. Yet nothing focuses the mind on global warming and its potential consequences quite so sharply as the occasional news flash from some remote corner of the globe documenting startling changes in landscapes once thought to be immutable. Two years ago, for instance, scientists told us that the snows of Kilimanjaro, which inspired Ernest Hemingway's famous short story, could vanish in 15 years, and that the seemingly indestructible glaciers in the Bolivian Andes might not last another 10. Last year brought evidence of disturbing and apparently irreversible changes in Alaska's environment — melting permafrost, sagging roads, dying forests — arising from an astonishing rise of 5.4 degrees in Alaska's average temperature over the past 30 years.

Now comes more unsettling news: a report from three scientists that the Arctic's largest ice shelf — a 150-square-mile, 100-foot-thick mass of ice that has been sitting more or less intact off the northern Canadian coast for 3,000 years — is disintegrating. The scientists say the breakup results from a century-long warming trend that has accelerated in the last two years. It is not yet possible, they say, to tie the melting directly to rising atmospheric concentrations of so-called greenhouse gases, or to the human activities — chiefly the burning of fossil fuels like coal and oil — that create these gases. But they warn that a "critical threshold" has been breached, and that on the other side of this threshold lie abrupt changes in natural conditions we have long taken for granted.

There could be a bright side to all this, if it persuaded the Bush administration and Congress to take the issue of climate change more seriously. That is not happening. Mr. Bush remains fixated on a voluntary approach that offers little hope of meaningful reductions in industrial emissions of carbon dioxide, the main global warming gas. Congress, meanwhile, is fashioning an energy bill that will do little to reduce these emissions, and indeed could increase them by heaping new subsidies on the oil, gas and coal industries. Washington's carapace of denial seems sturdier than any glacier.