WASHINGTON -- In 2009, the Obama administration approved a 986-mile pipeline to bring 400,000 barrels of oil sands petroleum a day from western Canada to the United States. Almost no one paid attention. Construction on the pipeline, called the Alberta Clipper, was quietly completed last year.

In that same period, the administration considered construction of a similar project, the Keystone XL. So far only in the blueprint stage, this pipeline has become an explosive political issue that Republicans are seizing as their first challenge to President Obama in the new Congress.

The Republican-controlled House is set to pass a bill to force approval of Keystone on Friday and the Senate is expected to pass the measure in coming weeks. Republicans say the pipeline will create jobs and spur the economy while environmentalists and some Democrats say it will destroy pristine forests and create carbon pollution. Mr. Obama has vowed to veto the bill.

But most energy and policy experts say the battle over Keystone overshadows the importance of the project as an environmental threat or an engine of the economy. The pipeline will have little effect, they say, on climate change, production of the Canadian oil sands, gasoline prices and the overall job market in the United States. At the same time, Mr. Obama's promised veto will not necessarily kill the pipeline because the president will retain the authority to make a final decision about its fate.

"The political fight about Keystone is vastly greater than the economic, environmental or energy impact of the pipeline itself," said Robert N. Stavins, director of the environmental economics program at Harvard. "It doesn't make a big difference in energy prices, employment, or climate change either way."

Environmentalists who have been arrested outside the White House protesting Keystone say that extracting petroleum from the Canadian oil sands produces more carbon emissions than conventional oil production and that the pipeline will provide a conduit to market for the oil. But a State Department review of the project last year concluded that building the pipeline would not significantly increase the rate of carbon pollution in the atmosphere because the oil is already making its way to market by existing pipelines and rail.

Republicans promote the project as a major source of employment and an economic engine, but the State Department review estimated that Keystone would support only about 35 permanent jobs. Keystone would create about 42,000 temporary jobs over the two years it will take to build it -- about 3,900 of them in construction and the rest are in indirect support jobs, such as food service. In comparison, there were 241,000 new jobs created in December alone.
Over all, the jobs represented by *Keystone* account than for less one-tenth of 1 percent of the American economy.

"This pipeline has become a symbolic issue all out of proportion to reality," said Robert McNally, the president of the Rapidan Group, a Washington-based energy consulting firm and a former top energy official in the George W. Bush administration. "Why is what ought to be a routine matter turned into an all-consuming Armageddon battle?"

The story of how a routine pipeline became such a politically volatile infrastructure project began during the George W. Bush administration, when the companies that hoped to build both the Alberta Clipper and the *Keystone XL* submitted their permit applications to the State Department.

Neither pipeline was an issue in the 2008 presidential campaign, nor did the *Keystone* pipeline draw much attention in the next few years as the State Department under Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton reviewed the project. By the summer of 2011, top State Department officials signaled that they were on the verge of approving the pipeline.

That was when environmentalists, led by an activist named Bill McKibben, made their move. Disappointed that Mr. Obama had failed to pass a climate change bill in his first term, they wanted to push him on environmental issues. They settled on the pipeline as their symbol and in that summer of 2011 staged the White House protests demanding that Mr. Obama stop *Keystone*. They hoped to send the message that by approving the pipeline, Mr. Obama would lose the support of his political base in the 2012 re-election. The State Department delayed the decision.

In those protests, Republicans saw an opening. "When folks started to get arrested outside the White House, it was obvious something was going on," said Michael McKenna, a Republican energy lobbyist who frequently consults on political strategy with House Republican leaders. In their internal polls on the issue, the strategists found that Americans generally supported the project -- often by a ratio of 3 to 1, Mr. McKenna said. Those numbers bear out today: A November poll by Pew Research found that 59 percent of Americans supported the project.

"We saw that this thing could be a killer for us," Mr. McKenna said. "It's easy to grab on to. It's a simple narrative. It's easy to explain to candidates and easy for them to turn around and explain to voters."

Republican consultants advised candidates to take on the issue, and the candidates did. Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential nominee in 2012, promised to approve the *Keystone* on his first day in office. Americans for Prosperity, the conservative advocacy group with financial ties to the billionaire libertarians Charles and David Koch, criticized Mr. Obama's delay of the *Keystone* decision in their first ad in the 2012 campaign season.

Two years later, Republican candidates for the House and Senate aired about 10,000 ads featuring the *Keystone* pipeline, according to data provided by Kantar Media/CMAG, a political media analysis firm. Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, a possible Republican presidential candidate in 2016, frequently mentions his support of *Keystone* as a centerpiece of a possible job creation plan. Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the new majority leader, vowed that his first bill on the Senate floor would be a forced approval of *Keystone*. The political fight over *Keystone* will probably last a long time. Mr. Obama has said he will issue a final decision on the project only after a Nebraska court issues a verdict on a dispute over the pipeline's proposed route through that state. Then the State Department will complete its additional environmental review, which could push the decision back for months, if not years.

Until then, Mr. McKibben and his fellow environmentalists will continue to push on the issue and hope to claim a symbolic victory if Mr. Obama vetoes the project.

"It does not solve climate change if we stop *Keystone,*" Mr. McKibben said. "But if we build out the oil sands, it's an enormous quantity of carbon that won't leave the ground. If the president blocks *Keystone XL*, he becomes the first world leader to say, 'Here's a project we're not doing because of its effect on the climate.'"

But the oil will continue to flow out of Canada with or without the *Keystone*.
"There are several oil pipelines that cross the Canadian border, and the oil is already moving to market through them," said Christine Tezak, an analyst with ClearView Energy Partners, a Washington consulting firm. "It seems strange that we're going through such gyrations over this particular piece of infrastructure, when the State Department said, 'Oh, sure' to the Alberta Clipper."


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GRAPHIC: PHOTOS: Above, Senators John Barrasso, Joe Manchin III, Lamar Alexander and Mike Lee of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which passed the Keystone XL pipeline bill. At left, the panel chairwoman, Senator Lisa Murkowski. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY JABIN BOTSFORD/THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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