

» THIS STORY: [READ +](#) | [WATCH +](#) | [TALK +](#) | [Comments](#)

## Post Magazine

Live Discussion with Post Magazine writers

### Washington Post Magazine: Leading the Way

Training Women for Political Careers

Vanessa Gezari and Debbie Walsh

Post Magazine Contributor; Director of the Center for American Women and Politics  
Monday, March 16, 2009; 12:00 PM

Last year, Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin blazed trails for women in politics. But the paths for aspiring female leaders are still much rockier than many had hoped.

#### THIS STORY

▪ [Where to Now?](#)

» [Transcript: Washington Post Magazine: Leading the Way](#)

▪ [On Leadership: Marilyn Carlson Nelson, Chairman, Carlson Companies](#)

[View All Items in This Story](#)


Washington Post Magazine contributor **Vanessa Gezari** and **Debbie Walsh**, director of the [Center for American Women and Politics](#) at Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics were online **Monday, March 16** to discuss Gezari's Post Magazine [cover story](#), "Where to Now?".

**A transcript follows.**

**Debbie Walsh:** Good afternoon, I'm Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics. Founded in 1971, the Center is nationally recognized as the leading source of scholarly research and current data about American women's political participation. Its mission is to promote greater knowledge and understanding about women's participation in politics and government and to enhance women's influence and leadership in public life.

CAWP's education and outreach programs translate research findings into action, addressing women's under-

**GALLERY**



**Leading the Way**

At the rate we're going, it could take 100 years for women to achieve equal representation in Congress. Some say the only way to change that is to start small and start young.

Discuss: [Live Q&A, Monday](#)  
Debate: [On Leadership](#)  
Watch: [Video Interview With Marilyn Carlson Nelson](#)

» [LAUNCH PHOTO GALLERY](#)

## VIEWPOINT

**DISCUSSION ARCHIVE**

- **February 26, 2009: BizBooks:**  
**Leader Guest:** Larina Kase
- **December 17, 2008: Teen Safe:**  
**Web Guest:** Anne Collier and L...
- **December 5, 2008: BizBooks:**  
**You Guest:** Peter Montoya
- **November 6, 2008: More Energy:**  
**Dioxide Guest:** Richard A. Seal
- **October 31, 2008: Christless:**  
**Dr. Michael S. Horton**



#### Today's Discussions

##### Earlier Today

- **Politics:** Ben Pershing
- **Wizards/NBA:** Ivan Carter
- **Funny?:** Gene Weingarten
- **Economy:** AIG/Public Outrage
- **Opinion:** Eugene Robinson
- **Cooking:** Kim O'Donnel
- **Station Break:** Paul Farhi
- **Chat House:** Michael Wilbon

[Weekly Schedule](#)

representation in political leadership with effective, imaginative programs serving a variety of audiences. As the world watched Americans considering female candidates for the nation's highest offices, CAWP's nearly four decades of analyzing and interpreting women's participation in American politics have provided a foundation and context for the discussion.

Our Ready to Run campaign training for women has been held in our home state of New Jersey for ten years and we now have similar programs up and running with partners in Oklahoma, Iowa, Alabama, Hawaii and Pennsylvania. NEW Leadership, a residential program to educate college women for public leadership is currently operating with University based partners in 15 states.

Vanessa Gezari's article, "Leading the Way," raised important issues related to the future of women's political participation and I'm looking forward to a lively discussion this afternoon.

Debbie

---

**Vanessa Gezari:** Hello and thanks for joining this chat.

Writing this story reminded me of the ways that being a woman profoundly influences my experience, both at work and in my personal life. My mother, a college professor, was the first female member of her faculty to fight for medical coverage for the costs associated with my birth and delivery. This coverage had previously been reserved for the wives of male professors, including one woman who was on the faculty herself, because at that time - only three and a half decades ago - so few women both worked and raised kids. Thanks to her struggles and those of many others, women my age have less reason to think about the places where women are still a rarity, including the highest levels of politics and business. I look forward to taking your questions.

---

**Kansas City, Mo./Alexandria, Va.:** Vanessa, thank you for your excellent profile of Jennifer James Soto and her desire to move up in politics.

I attended a symposium in Kansas City in March 2002 at which Marie Wilson of the White House Project and other women discussed the possibility of electing a woman president. The consensus seemed to be that a good year to do that would be 2020, the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote. My reaction: why wait that long?

I stood outside on some cold days in March 2008 collecting petition signatures to help get Sen. Hillary Clinton's name on the Democratic presidential primary ballot in Virginia. When she pulled out of the race I began wearing a Barack Obama shirt.

Checking the Obama Web site when I returned from voting for him, I was impressed to find a gmail from Michelle Obama asking me to telephone five fellow Democrats. I knew then that the Obamas' campaign had truly been extremely well organized from the grass roots level on up.

One day last week I finally had the chance to say to a young woman with skin color the opposite of mine, "I like your bumper sticker." It says, WOMEN FOR OBAMA 2008.

**Debbie Walsh:** I think the answer to when will it be a good time to elect a woman President is not a particular year but rather a question of positioning and circumstance. We will elect a woman president when we have a candidate who is well positioned to raise the money and put together the organization that can conduct kind of campaign that is necessary to win the presidency. In 2008, we came very close to seeing a woman elected. We will now have to see which women step forward in the future.

Recent Discussion Transcripts

**TOOLBOX**

Resize Print E-mail  
Yahoo! Buzz Save/Share +

**COMMENT**

No comments have been posted yet about this item. Be the first!

**POST A COMMENT**  
You must be logged in to leave a comment.  
[Log in](#) | [Register](#)  
[Why Do I Have to Log In Again?](#)

Post

[Discussion Policy](#)

**WHO'S BLOGGING** powered by **sphere**

[» Links to this discussion](#)

**Vanessa Gezari:** Thanks for your question. I think the 2008 election season showed in no uncertain terms that women are not a monolith in the world of politics, and that to me was one of the most important things about it. In much the same way that Obama showed people that African-Americans are more varied and complex than they may think, Clinton and the other women on the political stage did for women. I look forward to more, and more different kinds of female candidates, whenever they choose to stick their toes in the water.

---

**Des Moines Iowa:** As a woman, I am delighted to see so many women as governors, (9, then 8, 9, then 8 again), a record of 18 women in the Senate, and 74 women in Congress. So why isn't any story being written about this success for women in the US political arena? Why do I only see more complaining that we are not at 50% representation? Isn't the idea of a quota placed upon us only dragging us away from celebrating each and every addition of women at the political table? Please reply.

**Debbie Walsh:** While the numbers of women in office are moving up, they are moving up at a very slow rate. There are currently 73 women serving in the US House, up by only two since 2008, we have one more woman in the US Senate and the same number of women governors. The number of women in statewide elected executive positions (Lt. Governors, Secretaries of State, State Treasurers, etc.) has actually been going down since 2001. Finally, at the state legislative level we have seen almost no growth since 1996. While I don't want to ignore the increases, I also don't want to over inflate them. The growth has been extremely slow and has not been across the board.

---

**Arlington VA:** Do you think the buzz about Hillary for president, and the buzz about Condi Rice as a possible VP in the 2008 race led the way for Sarah Palin to be chosen? Of these women, do you think that each of them was seen as tough enough like Margaret Thatcher to do the job as either president or VP?

**Debbie Walsh:** Sarah Palin was selected as John McCain's running mate for two reasons, one which worked and one which didn't. First, the McCain campaign needed to do something to shore up the Christian conservative base within the party. Her candidacy was able to do that. Second, there was much talk after Hillary Clinton's campaign about where would the disaffected Clinton supporters go in the general election, particularly the women. The selection of Palin was an attempt to make inroads into the women's vote, a vote which has traditionally gone to Democratic candidates. Palin on the ticket ultimately did not pull in women voters. Women strongly preferred Barack Obama to John McCain (56 percent for Obama, 43 percent for McCain), unlike men, who split their votes about evenly for the two presidential candidates (49 percent for Obama, 48 percent for McCain).

Hillary Clinton was the first woman to run a viable presidential campaign in the United States. She was the first woman to win a primary or a caucus and she garnered 18 million votes across the country. She was perceived as strong and capable and certainly showed that Americans are ready to pull the lever for a woman for President.

---

**Alpine, Texas:** My traditional feminist friends were outraged over the choice of Sarah Palin as VP candidate. There was certainly a lot to legitimately criticize Palin about but the outrage was something far deeper. My question is, was the deeply visceral reaction to Palin because she was "not a feminist like me"? As if the past 125 years fighting for women's rights was, in the end, only intended for certain women of a certain political stripe with traditional feminist values positions. Thank you.

**Debbie Walsh:** There were women voters who were upset by the selection of Sarah Palin. They saw this selection as an attempt to capture the "women's vote" without understanding why women vote the way they do. It is true that one of the reasons Palin was selected by the McCain campaign was to pick up some of those disaffected Clinton supporters. However, Palin's positions on issues were so different from the women who supported Senator Clinton that her candidacy made no difference in how those women in the general election. There was a seven point gender gap, with women seven percentage points more likely to support Senator Obama than men.

I think much of the anger was directed at the lack of understanding on the part of the McCain campaign about why women supported Senator Clinton. It wasn't just because she was a woman candidate, but because of her positions on a range of issues. Selecting any woman as his running mate wasn't going to bring Senator McCain the votes of women.

**Vanessa Gezari:** To me the most interesting thing about the contrast between Clinton and Palin was that they came to represent opposite ends of the spectrum of traditional ideas about women. In reality, both were doubtless much more complex than the campaigns and much of the coverage made them out to be, and missing those complexities is our loss. We need a more textured political culture, regarding both men and women. I think many women saw the Palin pick as an opportunistic move and wondered why McCain didn't pick a more qualified woman, even one who disagreed with them. But there are things to admire about Palin, and there is no room for dogmatism on this issue.

---

**San Francisco, Calif.:** Can a group like Emerge and a build-up-from-the-grassroots-pipeline approach make a difference, if there's patience for this method?

**Debbie Walsh:** It is critical for there to be programs throughout the country that recruit and train women to run for office. We have seen a stagnation in the numbers of women running for office at almost every level. We know from research that women are less likely than men to decide to run for office without the encouragement of someone else. We also know that women are less likely to be asked by political party leaders to run for office. That combination is a real challenge for getting more women to run and getting more women elected. Partisan programs like Emerge on the Democratic side and the Republican Excellence in Public Service programs are both important efforts to recruit and train women to run. The Center for American Women and Politics has established the Ready to Run Campaign Training for women which is bipartisan and has now established partnerships in six states. There are numerous other groups training women to run and the more energy focused on this the better.

While it takes patience, it is essential for us to build a farm team of women candidates and officeholders so that when political opportunities arise, such as open seats, women are prepared and ready to step up and run.

---

**Further Reading:** Great article! With Hiliary's historic campaign, I became interested in this topic a few months back. I have read a few books out there on it, including Dee Dee Myers' "Why Women Should Rule the World" and Representative's Maloney's book "Rumors of our Progress have been Greatly Exaggerated." Can you recommend any other good books to read on this topic?

**Debbie Walsh:** I suggest "Gender and Elections" edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard Fox.

---

**Baltimore, Md.:** Quite an intriguing article, I must say. However, one point or issue that I notice was either conveniently ignored or deftly glossed over: Is the White House Project completely non-partisan? It's been my experience that women who become activist in politics tend to lean strongly left of center--which, of course, is a whole chicken-or-egg question in itself--but if, say 90% of the participants in the conference were indeed Democratic-leaning, would that not bear reporting in the article?

**Vanessa Gezari:** Thanks for this. The White House Project is nonpartisan according to its materials and as far as I know. I didn't survey all the women at the conference I attended to find out what their political affiliation was, but some of that is dictated by geography -- the conference I attended took place outside Atlanta and was predominantly African-American, which would have made political leanings hard to gauge anyway in an election year with both a woman and an African-American having just finished a tough fight for the top slot on the Democratic ticket. There are groups for Republican women in politics, including the WISH list, which works to elect pro-choice Republican women. But Democrats may be a bit ahead of the curve on this.

**Debbie Walsh:** There are numerous partisan and non/bi-partisan programs that train and recruit

women candidates. In about twenty states there are programs for Republican women called the Excellence in Public Service series. On the Democratic side there is a program called Emerge which started out in California and is now training women in a number of states. EMILY's List, a pro-choice Democratic PAC and WISH List, a pro-choice Republican PAC also run campaign trainings for women. The Center for American Women and Politics' Ready to Run program runs bi-partisan campaign trainings in New Jersey, and has partnered with Universities and/or organizations in five other states to establish their own state based Ready to Run trainings.

---

**Springfield, Va.:** Thanks for your excellent article.

After the two women candidates in our recent election were so vilified by the press (and, let's be honest, by the DNC), I fear that no woman will WANT to run for executive office. The first time a woman ran for VP, she was so horribly maligned that it was more than two decades before another woman put herself out there. What your article doesn't say is that two women ran and lost, and both of them were more qualified (no Palin fan here, but she did have Executive Office experience) than the gentleman who won. I'm not a woman, but I don't understand why women aren't bothered by that.

**Debbie Walsh:** I think there are many, many women who are more than bothered by this. It was deeply disturbing to see the kind of coverage that these candidates received, whether you supported them or not.

**Vanessa Gezari:** Thanks. I have to disagree that the guy who got elected isn't as qualified as the women who lost. It's also true, sadly, that presidential contests are only sometimes decided on the basis of qualifications (look at some of our previous picks), and that is no one's fault but our own. I think women need thick skins -- I find that I need one in my job, and I know that women in politics do. It would also help if we had more women running and winning, because it would make them more familiar in these roles. I think unfamiliarity is what makes some of the attacks possible.

---

**Richmond:** I was a feminist when most of these readers were in diapers. Still am. As Tip O'Neill said, "all politics is local," and for me, increasing grassroots women's involvement in politics is enough. Who best represents those interests (male or female) is of no concern to me. I became a feminist because I want all people to be judged by their acts, not their gender and I give the same to men, not just women. Hillary and Sarah were flawed candidates, not because they were women, but because they were flawed people.

**Vanessa Gezari:** I think you raise a good point, though I think too often we overlook the need for more women in all kinds of posts -- not just political ones -- because a lot of us feel the way you do. If we believe as a society that there's an intrinsic benefit to diversity (some of us do and some of us don't) why shouldn't we also want to include a fair number of women's voices in the conversation? The fact is that political leaders make key decisions that affect our lives, and I for one want people in those jobs who understand where people of all stripes are coming from, including women. Not that men can't use their imaginations, but I think if political representation were overwhelmingly female, we'd all acknowledge that as a problem for guys. While I completely agree that Clinton and Palin had the some of the same kinds of problems as candidates that men would have, and that in both cases those were real liabilities, I have to say that I also think these women came in for some abuse that I haven't seen any male candidate face -- take a glance through the internet to see some of the amazing things that were said about them in the course of the campaign.

**Debbie Walsh:** Having more women in office is not just about equity and fairness, more women in office means different issue priorities and a different take on the public policy agenda. We know from our research at the Center for American Women and Politics that women bring different life experiences to the table and that means different policy priorities. Women are more likely than their male counterparts in elected office to make issues affecting women, families and children a priority. Women are more likely to feel a responsibility to represent the interests of those people who aren't usually represented in government--not just women, but poor people and people of

color. This is a question about making sure that government is reflective of the population so that policy is reflective of the needs of the country's citizens.

---

**Bowie, Maryland:** Good Afternoon,

Your article on Women in Politics spoke to me in a profound way. I am a 35 year old mother of two young girls, and I gave up working full-time four years ago. Prior to having children I was on a career track that allowed me to move up extremely fast in the public sector. The reason I left my job was because I needed more flexibility to help me balance work and family. I had no problem working a lot and working hard, I just needed a job that allowed me to work remotely a couple of days per week. Four years ago it was hard for me to request a flexible work schedule that allowed me to work different hours or remotely. At that time, management looked down on women that needed more flexibility, and I felt like I had to choose between being successful in my career and being a mother.

My children are still young, but I am ready to go back to work full-time. How do you suggest that I get back into the workforce without skipping a beat?

**Vanessa Gezari:** Wow, this is a tough one. I'm not sure I know the answer, though I know there are lots of women out there who would identify. I think one thing I learned from hanging out with Jennifer James Soto and watching how her life changed after attending the White House Project was that sometimes all you need is to see someone else doing something you think is impossible, and that makes it a lot easier. For Jennifer, there was one conversation she had with another mom who was also a political activist about how to be engaged in politics while still paying a lot of attention to your kids, and that moment really stuck with her. As the months passed, this and other experiences from the conference and elsewhere seemed to kind of filter down through her consciousness until they actually changed the way she thought about what she could or couldn't do. So maybe you need to get out of your comfort zone a bit and start encountering some women who have done what you want to do. As a side note concerning the corporate world, several business schools, including Harvard, actually have or are creating curricula to address the needs of women like you who got out of the workforce and want to get back in.

---

**Florida chick:** The drubbing Hillary got and the attacks on Palin were stunning not just in their content but in their intensity. Seemingly normal people (men) would get into Clinton derangement syndrome mode at the drop of a hat. It was as if it was acceptable to be boiling mad at the nerve of "that woman" and use as cover that she had "baggage." They all had baggage, as well as Obama. I feel knee-capped.

**Debbie Walsh:** I think lots of women out there felt the way you did. Whether you supported either of these candidates or not, the treatment they received in the media and on the internet was deeply disturbing. The notion that it was okay to attack either of them with gender slurs -- even on television and radio, was shocking. As Vanessa pointed out in her article, from Hillary Clinton nutcrackers to Sarah Palin inflatable love dolls the range of sexist insults was stunning. This has implications not just for women's political leadership, but women's leadership in every sector.

**Vanessa Gezari:** Yes, I agree with you. People were saying things that had no place in public discourse, and others -- commentators, pundits, regular people, including women -- seemed unwilling to call them on it, as if they felt that doing so would be mistaken for special pleading. This is something we really have to work on. So many of us are appalled if someone shouts a racial slur at a candidate of color, and rightly so -- Obama took his own hits on this score during the campaign. But where is the public outrage -- not just from the screaming feminist set, but from EVERYONE -- when someone asks Hillary Clinton to "iron my shirt" and asks Palin to do worse? This is where I think women can be a bit too nice about things and sidestep an issue because we don't want to seem like man-haters. Women -- and importantly, women my age (34) and younger -- need to be OK with saying this stuff is inexcusable.

---

**Falls Church, Va.:** The noteworthy aspect of Sarah Palin's campaign was that she was

immediately attacked for being a bad mother, because she was supposedly not devoting herself sufficiently to her children. No male politician ever gets attacked for his parenting; for instance, no reporter ever bothered to ask whether his young children were affected by his long absences and demanding work schedule. It's a measure of how far we have yet to go that a female candidate is still immediately made the target of anti-feminist criticism.

**Debbie Walsh:** The issue of parenthood is a fascinating one. For men who run for office having a family is a plus. That picture of him that runs in his brochure with his wife, his young kids and the golden retriever is priceless. For women candidates a picture like that raises the question, "who is going to take care of your kids if you get elected?" Former MA Governor Jane Swift had twins while she was in office and it was a constant questions she faced while serving. Former MI Governor John Engler and his wife had triplets while he was serving and no one ever worried who was taking care of the kids. This is one of the reasons that women wait to run for office until their children are older. We know from our research that women state legislators are less likely than their male colleagues to have children under the age of 18 living at home. This delayed start means a shorter trajectory in elective office.

---

**Virginia:** Remember how some called Bill Clinton the first black president, not because he was actually black, but because he was the first president to respect, understand and value the black experience? Well, I say Barack Obama is the first woman president, because he better respects and 'gets' me as a woman voter than a candidate ever has, including Hillary Clinton (who always turned me off as a 'coattails' wife).

**Vanessa Gezari:** Thanks for this. I disagree with you about Clinton -- I think she's more than proven her ample skill as a politician and policymaker, whether you agree with her or not, whether you like her or not. But I do agree about Obama. I think he seems genuinely woman-friendly. Time will tell if his policies bear that out, but as someone who's been part of a minority community in leadership himself, I have high hopes that he will be attentive to issues around women and leadership.

**Debbie Walsh:** I agree that Hillary Clinton has certainly proven herself as a political person in her own right. She has been an advocate for women and girls in this country and globally and her years in the US Senate certainly cemented her as a political force independent of her husband.

---

**Arlington, Va.:** Do you believe having more women in politics will create more family-friendly policies? One of the reason, I believe, so many working women drop out of the workforce is that work hours are still set-up for a 2 parent household where one parent works and one is at home. Employers need to change working hours and enact things like paternal leave so women don't have to bear the brunt of weighing jobs and childrearing.

**Debbie Walsh:** This is an important question. Women officeholders make a difference to both the policy and process of government. A story that illustrates this is from a woman legislator in Iowa. She was the only woman on an employment and labor committee when a bill came up for a job training program. One of the key targets for the program were women, but there was no child care provision in the bill. It took the woman legislator to raise this and make sure child care was included so mothers with young kids could participate. It's not that the men didn't support it once it was raised, it just didn't occur to them. This is why we need women in office, they understand these issues in a different way.

---

**Lyme, Conn.:** Every time I hear political scientists explain why there are fewer females than males in elected positions, they usually state that women tend to enter politics later in life. What do you recommend that would encourage women that they can enter politics earlier in life?

**Vanessa Gezari:** Debbie will have a great answer to this as she works directly on getting young women involved. From my point of view, there are a lot of really strong and valid reasons that young women and girls give for not wanting to get into politics, and I guess I'd start there. Why is our political culture so fractious and negative, and is there a way to change that? Can we present

more ideas and models of life partnerships that are more equitable, so that girls don't have to worry from the time their teenagers about how they're going to do it all? I think girls and young women are very confident in many, many areas now, and that's largely a product of a concerted social effort to be attentive to their needs and desires in academics, sports, etc. We can do the same with politics, but maybe politics has to be defined differently -- or expanded -- to fit them in.

---

**Debbie Walsh:** The questions this afternoon have been terrific. I want to thank Vanessa and the Washington Post for having me join in this lively chat. Please visit the Center for American Women and Politics website, [www.cawp.rutgers.edu](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu) for more information about women's participation in politics and our programs to encourage more women to run for office and engage in the political process.

So long, Debbie

---

**I feel knee-capped.:** I don't. Campaigns are nasty for everyone, regardless of gender, race, political affiliation. If I take it personally, I'm no better than them. People attacked all the candidates, their spouses, their pets, their children. How 'bout Cindy McCain and all the news about her pill-popping? It was a function of campaigning, not gender. We will forever be labeled as sensitive and unworthy of the back rooms if we take things personally and cry sexism and don't fight back.

**Vanessa Gezari:** I know a lot of women feel the way you do. Someone emailed me that I was promoting a "victim" mentality for women, though nothing could be further from the truth. But I have to say that I disagree with you. Yes, campaigns are nasty and yes, we shouldn't take it personally. But how is it that male candidates and office-holders are so rarely asked to explain how they can be good parents, while women who run for office are asked this all the time? How is it that, as Jennifer Lawless, the author of one of the studies I wrote about, got you're-way-too-young-for-that responses (she says) for being a 30-something woman running for Congress when 30-something men do it all the time? No one is suggesting that women shouldn't have to face up to scrutiny and deal with scandal, or that they should ever cry sexism and give up. I just think we need to work a bit harder at speaking about, defining and breaking through some of these walls.

---

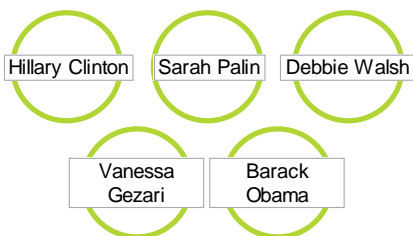
**Vanessa Gezari:** Thanks to everyone who took part in the chat today. I so appreciate your thoughtful questions, and I'll look forward with great interest to seeing which of you -- and which other women around the country -- emerge as our future leaders.

---

Editor's Note: [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com) moderators retain editorial control over Discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions. [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com) is not responsible for any content posted by third parties.

» THIS STORY: [READ +](#) | [WATCH +](#) | [TALK +](#) | [Comments](#)

#### Understand more about:



Articles

#### Related

**Washington Post Magazine: Leading the Way**  
TRANSCRIPT | Last year, Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin blazed trails for women in politics. But the paths for aspiring female leaders are still much rockier than many had hoped. Join a discussion of this week's Washington Post Magazine cover story, 'Where to Now?'

- **Washington Post Magazine: Fatal Distraction -- Kids, Cars and Hyperthermia**
- **Washington Post Magazine: Take a Deep Breath**

Web-Wide News Alerts