

## **Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey**

*Episode 42: Veterans Day: Becoming a Leader in the Military and at Yale*

*Guest: Yale College senior Bob Atkinson '24, a first-generation college student and U.S. Air Force veteran*

*Description: For this Veterans Day podcast, President Peter Salovey talks with U.S. Air Force veteran Bob Atkinson '24—an undergraduate in the Eli Whitney Students Program, two-time Bronze Star recipient, and Truman Scholar—about his leadership experiences in the military, on campus, and in the effort to eliminate the domestic opioid epidemic.*

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### FULL TRANSCRIPT

**Peter:** Hello everyone. I'm Peter Salovey and thank you for joining me for this Veterans Day edition of Yale Talk. For over three centuries, the call to serve our country has been answered dutifully, and with distinction, by generations of Yale students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The university's proud tradition of service dates to the Revolutionary War. It includes the nearly 30,000 Yalies who served in the First and Second World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam. And now, this tradition continues through those who are enlisted in the Reserve Officers Training Corps on campus, as well as the many veterans in our community. Today, I have the special pleasure of speaking with one of them. Bob Atkinson is a first-generation college student studying global affairs at Yale. After graduating from high school, he enlisted in the US Air Force and entered the Special Warfare Training Pipeline. Bob then became the first US Air Force member selected and assigned to the 75th Ranger Regiment's Reconnaissance Company. While at RRC, Bob conducted multiple combat deployments in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and twice received the Bronze Star for heroic or meritorious service. In addition to his military service, he has interned at the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, focusing his efforts on illicit drug supply reduction. So, Bob, it's an honor to welcome you today.

**Bob:** Thank you.

**Peter:** Thank you for joining me on Yale Talk. Let's begin, not at the beginning, but with your decision to apply to Yale, where we place a special emphasis on fostering a diverse and exceptional educational community. Yale, I'm proud to say, is routinely recognized among the best colleges in the nation for veterans, in part due to our commitment to ensuring that a Yale education is affordable for everyone. There are approximately 500 more first generation students like yourself in Yale College today than in 2013. But why did you choose Yale? What did you want to study here, and what did you expect to find at Yale?

**Bob:** Well, first of all, again, thank you for having me. The reason why I chose Yale had more to do with what the nontraditional student community here represented and how it was structured. So there's a lot of nontraditional student programs across the United States at top institutions. And I think that their academics at those institutions are great as well. But I think the Eli Whitney Students Program here at Yale is very unique in the sense that it's small and it's very

well integrated with the traditional student community. That ties into why I left the military and why I wanted to come to Yale. I really wanted to leave the microcosm that I was in in the military. And what I mean by that is when you're surrounded by like minded individuals and you're often having similar conversations and you have similar thoughts and similar backgrounds, I think that it can sometimes stunt your personal growth. And so the Eli Whitney Students Program being integrated with the traditional student community, it really spoke to me, and it tied to what my long-term interests were and really my short-term interests of gaining personal growth.

**Peter:** That's great for those who are listening. Just to clarify, our Eli Whitney scholars program is a program where students whose educations have been interrupted or delayed for some reason—could be military service, could be family tragedy, in one famous case, it was because of a National Hockey League career as a goalie—for whatever reason, you can apply to Yale as an Eli Whitney scholar and then matriculate for a degree. And that community, because it tends to be a little older than our students who come through the traditional path, forms its own network as well. So you get to Yale, and what did you choose to study?

**Bob:** So at first, I took a pretty significant amount of time to decide on that, and really just explore classes. And around the halfway through the fall semester of my sophomore year, I became pretty interested in the global affairs major, really, for two reasons, I think. One, it seemed like there was a pretty significant emphasis on an interdisciplinary curriculum, and without really knowing what I wanted to do after Yale professionally, I thought that that would be broad and all encompassing and something that I could apply to a lot of different career paths. And the other reason why is I thought that my previous experiences would benefit me in my academic studies moving forward, and I think it really has. I think not only have I been able to learn a lot about different theories and the academic canon that ties into how we conduct national security and international development, but I also think that I've been able to lean on my previous experiences and sort of color some of the stories that we talk about in class.

**Peter:** Oh, it's great. And the global affairs major is sponsored by the Jackson School of Global Affairs, which is Yale's newest school. So now let's talk a little bit about your decision to join the service. Yalies have joined the service for more than 300 years, and there's a spirit of sacrifice that is involved in joining the service, and I think that's a hallmark of Yale's focus on service for the public good. And so you exemplify that spirit. But how did you decide to join the service, you just joined right after high school? Tell us a little bit about that part of your life.

**Bob:** Yeah, I think for many, one of the more common stories that you hear is that folks, especially around the time that I was joining, which I joined in 2010, I do vividly remember 911. And so I think there are many times where people assumed that service members, especially those that have gone to war, join for patriotism. And for me, that definitely wasn't the case. I graduated high school in 2009. I grew up in a pretty rough home, low-income family, lots of drug abuse, and it was a tough upbringing, especially towards the end of my high school time. There were a lot of struggles that I was dealing with personally, and my siblings were as well. I have a

younger brother and older sister, and with my brother still being in high school and with things deteriorating in my immediate family, I decided that I was going to work at a group home. So I was working with high functioning, vulnerable adults. So I spent a few months doing that to be there for my brother and for my mom to support them in any way I could. And then about a year after that, at the end of 2010, I decided that it was time to really look towards the future for myself. I think that I felt stagnant and like even though I was doing a lot of things to give back to my family, I did need to prioritize my personal life as well. And I thought that I could also better help my mother and my brother and my sister by doing that. So for me, it had more to do with helping my family, and creating more of a stable path for myself in the future than anything else. At the time, I joined mostly out of necessity. And so I joined the Air Force and entered the Special Warfare Training pipeline, and it benefited me, and it benefited my family a lot. To this day, extremely thankful that I've done that. And it's informed my leadership and it's got me here today.

**Peter:** I know you can't talk about some of the things you did while in the Air Force, but can you characterize a bit of what you worked on?

**Bob:** Yeah, so I was a joint terminal attack controller. So my job was essentially to plan and coordinate and conduct close air support for different customers, as I would call them, whether that's the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps. Around halfway through my career, I was working at the regimental reconnaissance company. There, I worked in a little bit of a different capacity, focusing mostly on special missions and special operations in general. Did multiple combat deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq. There, I wasn't doing as much of the joint terminal attack controller role, and I wasn't controlling close air support. I was focusing mostly on the reconnaissance mission set, both traditional and nontraditional, which I'll kind of leave a little bit open ended. And I did that until 2020. Ironically, I finished my last deployment in Afghanistan in spring of 2020. And if you remember, Covid hit around the time that I got back. And I actually came to Yale after my service time in fall of 2020 and was still on active duty until November 27th, but I was just on leave. So there's definitely overlap between my time here and my time in the service.

**Peter:** Well, I know you've had a very remarkable Yale career. In April, you became the first student in our Eli Whitney Students Program to win a Truman Scholarship. And this is a scholarship that is bestowed on the basis of academic success, leadership accomplishments, and public service leadership potential. You also were selected as a 2023 Tillman Scholar, and then you received Yale College's Francis Gordon Brown Prize. You've had quite a student career. I'd be interested in how you see the interaction between your military service and experience, and then your Yale education, in setting you up for the future.

**Bob:** That's such an interesting question. I think the way I view my military service is it's much more about how it's informed my character and my leadership than anything else. I think the way that I look at it today, and the way I try to use it as an asset, is to make sure that it doesn't make up my entire identity. But I want to make sure that my military service does continue to influence

not only how I work day-to-day, but how I interact with people and the level of commitment that I have to anything that I do. One thing that's important for me to note, I mentioned earlier that I came from a pretty tough upbringing, and when I joined the military, I was not a leader. I had a lot of character flaws. I wasn't a good teammate, I wasn't a good friend, and there were people that really rallied around me instead of trying to isolate me and condemn me for how I was. And trust me, I was not somebody that you would want to be around. They really embraced me. I look back on that and I'm super thankful for some of the mentors and people that were there for me. And I want to make sure that every day moving forward, I do that for other people as well. So I'm going to continue to make sure that it informs the way that I lead and the way that I interact with people day to day, no matter where I work. The connection between that and my academics is a tough one to really draw on the spot. If anything, in my mind, what's been more beneficial is to realize that all of the things that I've done in the past do not mean that success is guaranteed in the future, and I actually think that separating the two has been more beneficial for me. And really being humble and realizing that you can have a career that you had in the past, one that you were very successful in, but sometimes you have to just set that aside and really focus on the task at hand. And so for me, coming into school, having not studied in a decade, it was extremely important to make sure that I was taking academic seriously. The skills I've learned will help me in the future, but I think that if I continue to remember the way that I approached academics and I apply that to what I do professionally in the future, realizing that success academically isn't going to guarantee success professionally, I think that will set me up. So I really want to enjoy the moment, enjoy the achievements, but I definitely don't want to rest on them and think that for any second that past successes are going to guarantee it in the future.

**Peter:** That kind of humility is admirable, despite the success you had in the military and the success you've had as a student. If you could project yourself twenty years from now, what's the perfect job for you?

**Bob:** That's a really tough one. I think we change often. The person I was two years ago isn't the person that I am today. Who I am morally, and who I am ethically, and what I believe is probably pretty close to what it was. But my interests continue to change based on the people that I interact with and the problems that arise in the world. In 20 years from now, I just want to make sure that I'm able to have an impact no matter what I'm doing, and I want it to be relevant to what's happening in 20 years. I don't necessarily think that there's a specific job or interest that I know for a fact in 20 years I want to be involved in, but whatever it is and wherever it is, I just want to make sure that it has the greatest impact and it helps the most amount of people. And I want to make sure that the problem that I'm addressing is extremely relevant, and it makes the world a better place.

**Peter:** It's wonderful to hear you say that, and it relates to our goals for our students who join ROTC. As you know, ROTC came back to Yale's campus in 2012, and one of the reasons I'm so proud of the return of ROTC is it helps students learn leadership skills, and the combination of skills you learn through military service and the kinds of things you learned through a Yale education, I would think, produce just the kind of leaders for all sectors of society throughout the

world that we describe as our educational mission. And so your own thoughts about the connection between military experience, a Yale education, and ultimately, a leadership role.

**Bob:** They benefit you in different ways, I would say. What military service does is it provides you an opportunity very early on in your career to both succeed or fail. Those leadership opportunities that you get early on are very unique that you otherwise probably wouldn't see in some areas of the private sector. And the military is very good at allowing you to fail, but being there to pick you back up. Just because there's the opportunity to lead and military service can help you with that, that doesn't mean it's going to make you a leader. There are phenomenal leaders that never serve in the military, and there's folks that join the military that end up never becoming great leaders. Where education plays a role is not only giving you skills to succeed in the future but opening up your perspective to other ways to think about problems. So I think that you're right in the sense that the two can turn you into a great leader, but I think they do it in different ways. Military service to me is about opportunities, but academics allows you to have such a wider perspective when you're taking on those roles in the future. And I do think that it'll make you a more effective leader that has a broader impact.

**Peter:** Well said. I don't think I could have explained the idea of becoming a leader through experiences in life, like military, through the education that Yale provides, as clearly as you just did. Thank you for that. So let's talk about the other roles that you have played. You've worked very closely on US drug policy and your desire to eliminate the domestic opioid epidemic. As you know very well, more Americans than ever are dying from overdoses, particularly fentanyl. US drug overdoses last year that resulted in death were more than 100,000. And US military veterans have been affected by the opioid overdose crisis. Mortality rate has increased by 53% between 2010 and 2019. I think 80% of drug deaths worldwide are due to opioids. So help us understand the problem, and then what kinds of policy we need to address that problem.

**Bob:** As you said, it's definitely a significant problem. I don't think that there is a simple clear-cut answer to that. I can tell you what I focus primarily on and where my interests lie. The things that I've been trying to address, really the main thing is increasing access to medication-assisted treatment. The one that I focused a lot of attention on is methadone. So methadone maintenance treatment, which if you're unfamiliar, methadone maintenance treatment, it's a full opioid agonist. And what it does is it essentially replicates the effects of illicit opioids, and prescribed, but it's essentially used as a tool to wean someone with opioid-use disorder off of that feeling of addiction. The reason, a lot of times, at least in my research, I focused on that is because the success rate has been very high. And I do think that there's an incentive for folks that are struggling with opioid-use disorder to seek it, because it does give a similar effect to the opioids that they're struggling with. Part of getting folks to want to seek treatment is creating incentives along the way. There are other treatment methods that don't replicate the same effects, which keeps individuals that are struggling with opioid-use disorder on the illicit market. So that is a bit of a tangent, but I think regulatory barriers are preventing access. And I actually think they're extremely simple fixes. On the demand side, the three things that I've looked at are, number one, the distribution method for medication-assisted treatments. Opioid treatment programs are the

only way for a physician to prescribe methadone. So an opioid treatment program is a facility that has to be certified by the federal government. Across the United States, there's roughly 1900 of them, which sounds like a lot. But when you actually think about the square mileage and the geography of the US, it's definitely not a significant amount. On top of that, for a physician to prescribe methadone to a patient, especially take-home methadone, they have to have a certain period of time where they've proven that they're reliable and they're not at risk of diverting their medication. And so until you've met that threshold for a physician to prescribe take-home methadone, you have to go to a clinic every day, which is a significant ask for someone that's struggling with opioid-use disorder, especially when you consider other things that may be going on in their life, whether that's kids, a job, lack of transportation, and just distance from an opioid treatment program. That is a significant concern for me, because seven weeks after I joined the military, my father passed away from a heroin overdose.

**Peter:** Sorry to hear that.

**Bob:** I appreciate it. He passed away, and we were from a rural town in southern Minnesota. And the closest opioid treatment program to where we were was in Minneapolis, which is a pretty significant drive. And that's not to say that access to methadone maintenance treatment would have saved my father's life. I don't know that that's the case, but I do think it could have helped. And so I think if we could focus on increasing access not only to people in urban centers, but also to folks struggling in the rural areas of America as well, that I think are often forgotten, I think we could save a lot of lives and help a lot of people. So that's one of the regulatory barriers that I see. Another one that I see is access for incarcerated individuals. So 12% of federal correctional facilities, as of 2021, prescribed any form of medication assisted treatment, which means even less of those prescribed methadone. So you're actually looking at about a third of those because a third are certified as opioid treatment programs. And incarcerated individuals are the most high-risk population in the US for overdose death. And so I think that we need to make significant progress in making sure that every federal correction facility is an opioid treatment program, so they're able to have the full resources to help folks struggling with opioid-use disorder. And then the last regulatory barrier that I want to talk about is the regulations that are preventing children under the age of eighteen from accessing methadone maintenance treatment. As the regulations currently state, children under the age of eighteen have to have had two failed attempts at short-term detoxification to qualify for methadone maintenance treatment. And what that's saying is that, essentially, children will have had to have risked overdosing twice to qualify for methadone maintenance treatment. And I just think that that's a significantly negligent regulation that we need to address moving forward.

**Peter:** Creating additional risk.

**Bob:** I agree.

**Peter:** It seems like there are significant barriers that prevent someone from seeking methadone treatment, and to add extra ones through regulation seems wrong. I'm surprised to learn how few

treatment facilities there are in this country. That was eye opening, those numbers. So you speak with passion about this, and clearly your father's addiction and ultimately his overdose and death is part of your motivation for it. Is it something that you think you'll stay with after graduation?

**Bob:** I would say that it's something I'm passionate about and it's one of my interests. But I'm passionate and interested in quite a few different things. I 100% will have an impact on it in the future. Whether I'm doing that as my occupation, that may not be the case. I have not fully decided on that just yet. I'm also passionate because it still affects my community. It affects my brother, my sister, and my mother today. So it's always present in my life. And by 'it- I mean opioids and addiction in general. So I have intrinsic buy in toward the problem. But in terms of what I plan to be doing in the years to come, I think for me right now, I'm focusing on this year and enjoying my time and really trying to build as many relationships as I can. This last summer, I interned at McKinsey. The summer before that, I interned, as you said, at the State Department, doing international narcotics and law enforcement. So I've been trying to get exposed to a lot of different areas and different sectors. I haven't completely decided on what I'm going to do yet, but I am leaning towards going back to McKinsey. I really enjoyed my summer. I was able to not only work with extremely high-performing individuals, but at least in the sector I was working in, I felt that I could have an impact on national security, just in a different way. It was extremely fulfilling for me.

**Peter:** So great to hear, and I know that you're going to be successful in whatever you ultimately choose, and I wish you the best luck in finishing your Yale career, but also in choosing a path that has the most impact on society.

**Bob:** Thank you.

**Peter:** So, Bob, I understand you have a particular affinity for Dostoevsky, and in one of his most notable quotes, he suggests it is not the brains that matter most, but that which guides them—the character, the heart, generous qualities, progressive ideas. Your intellectual ability, coupled with the ideals that guide, it is truly inspiring. Thank you again for joining me today on Yale Talk. I want also to extend my heartfelt gratitude to you, and to all the current and former military service members who are listening to this broadcast, for your contributions to our country. Yale strives to honor and support you through the Yale Veterans Network, a campus group for students, faculty, and staff, and through the Yale Veterans Association, for alumni. If you're not already participating in these groups, I hope you will consider joining them.

**Peter:** To friends and members of the Yale community, thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care. The theme music, *Butterflies and Bees*, is composed by Yale professor of music and director of university bands Thomas C. Duffy and is performed by the Yale Concert Band.

*Related links:*

*Eli Whitney Students Program* <https://admissions.yale.edu/eli-whitney>

*Yale Veterans Network* <https://yvn.yale.edu/>

*Yale Veterans Association* <https://www.yaleveterans.org/s/1667/y2/index.aspx?gid=41&pgid=61>