Yale Talk: Conversations with President Peter Salovey

Episode 11: Veterans Day: Pursuing Excellence in the Military and at Yale

**Peter Salovey:** Hello, everyone, and welcome to Yale Talk. I’m Peter Salovey, and thank you for joining me to commemorate Veterans Day.

To all our current and former military service members who are listening: thank you. You have my deepest gratitude and respect.

Yale students and graduates have served with distinction in every major conflict since the Revolutionary War. That legacy of service continues today. The Yale community is proud of the many students who currently serve in the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps on our campus. And we are proud of our faculty, staff, and alumni who are veterans. We support our veterans through the Warrior Scholar Project, which assists with the transition from the military to student life; the Yale Veterans Network, a campus group for students, faculty, and staff; and the Yale Veterans Association, an alumni organization. Yale warmly embraces its veterans as well as members of our community who are actively serving in the military and those who participate in the ROTC.

Today I’m honored to be joined by three current Yale undergraduates. Two of them are veterans and one is an active member of the military.

James “Jimmy” Hatch is a sophomore at Yale College. He served in the Navy for nearly twenty-six years, and he spent twenty-two of those as a Navy SEAL.

Andrew Nguyen is a junior. He was an Army Ranger, and he served as an Army Infantry Team Leader with the 1st Battalion of the 75th Ranger Regiment.

Allegra Pankratz is a senior and an active duty Marine. She is also in the Naval ROTC, so she takes part in classes and drills with her fellow NROTC midshipmen.

All three of them are part of Yale’s Eli Whitney Students Program, which welcomes to Yale exceptional nontraditional students.

Jimmy, Andrew, Allegra: thank you for joining me today.

**James Hatch:** Thanks, President Salovey. It’s great to be here.

**Andrew Nguyen:** Thank you for having us.

**Allegra Pankratz:** Thank you for having us, President Salovey.

**Peter:** Delighted you’re all here. So Jimmy, Andrew, Allegra, I’d like to start by asking you why you decided to apply to Yale. Why did you want to study here?Jimmy, I’ll start with you.

**James:** I guess ideally I wanted to be a better human being. And I came to Timothy Dwight to do a tea where I did a little bit of speaking. And afterwards I met with Jim Levinsohn and Professor Zack Cooper, and they told me about the program, the Eli Whitney program, and I laughed at them. And they said, no, really, you should look at it and check it out. And as I did, I was blown away. I just didn’t think that that I was capable of being a part of, and it was surprising, and even more surprising when I was accepted.

**Peter:** That’s fantastic. And Andrew, what about you? Why did you choose Yale?

**Andrew:** It’s kind of funny, President Salovey. Yale was never really on my radar initially when I was coming out of the military; none of Ivies were. No one in my high school would really go to those schools, so it was kind of natural for me when I was coming out of the military just to look at state schools. But long story short, I was introduced to Yale by a mentor I was working with at the time, so when I saw Yale, I came to visit, and really, it was kind of instant for me. It was the people, talking to them, being on campus, realizing the curiosity, the dedication to excellence. It was the genuine happiness that you see just talking to some students on Cross Campus and other faces. Being able to surround myself with these high-caliber students I realized would be a privilege. And when I was accepted, it was an opportunity for me to come here and grow. I’m thankful for that.

**Peter:** And Allegra, what about you?

**Allegra:** So it sounds like there are quite a few similarities between all three of our stories. I decided that I wanted to do one of the Marine Corps’ enlisted to commissioning programs, which allows me to go to school full time, and when I was deciding which colleges I wanted to apply to, my boss at the time said, “Why don’t you go to Yale?” And to this day, I still don’t know if he was joking or not, but I did some research, and I realized that there were quite a few veterans at Ivy League institutions, and I decided that if they could do it, I could certainly try. So I applied to multiple schools, and then, really the deciding factor for me in choosing Yale was the fact that the ROTC unit is on campus. As you know, a lot of units are made up of students from different colleges within one location. And for me, that was a big draw that our unit is on campus.

**Peter:** One of the great sources of pride for me is that I get to preside over an ROTC program that does attract students from neighboring colleges and universities in Connecticut. And when I do the president’s review, I’m very thrilled that there’s so many Yale students there, but having students from our neighboring colleges and universities also is a source of pride for me.

Before we go on, I just want to make sure we know what your majors are and what you’re focusing on at Yale. So, Jimmy, are you a global affairs major? It sounded that way.

**James:** I am not. I’m a humanities major. I really, I’ve had enough with the global affairs. [Laughter] Actually, I was really fortunate that I was accepted into the Directed Studies program, and as a part of that I was exposed to, you know, these classic works, and I realized, gosh, we’re not all that original. Many of these problems that we have aren’t really new, and I’m fascinated by those classic works, and then, you know, of course, history and art, poetry, things like that, I just love them. And I feel if I could secretly do a two-week version of Directed Studies for the people that I used to work with in the military, I think the results, the ripples, from that would be significant.

**Peter:** You are you are right now breaking down people’s stereotypes of who they think a Navy SEAL is. I love it.

And how about you, Andrew? What are you focusing on here at Yale?

**Andrew:** My major is molecular, cellular, and developmental biology, so just biology with a little bit of a specialty. I’m hoping to go to med school after so that’s kind of doing the premed track right now and taking all those requirements.

**Peter:** Fantastic. Are you working in a lab yet?

**Andrew:** I am. I was supposed to work in a lab this summer. So we all know what happened, so I did remote research for that lab, and now I’m doing clinical research with the lab at the School of Medicine.

**Peter:** Fantastic. And how about you, Allegra?

**Allegra:** I’m a global affairs major. So when I got here I wasn’t exactly sure what I wanted to focus on. And the global affairs program is a mixture of econ, statistics, and a language, so it’s been a good happy medium for me where I can study different things.

**Peter Salovey:** Very good. And are you finishing this spring?

**Allegra:** Yes, I am.

**Peter:** We’ll have some kind of graduation. I don’t know what it actually is going to look like it yet. We’ll just have to see what COVID lets us do.

So, Jimmy, you spent most of your adult life to this point serving our nation as a Navy SEAL. After writing a book about some of your military experiences, you then came here. What did you expect to find at Yale, and have we met your expectations?

**James:** [Laughter]Well, honestly, I didn’t really know what to expect. I mean, I had these ideas in my head. I don’t know where they came from—from various social media outlets or…I guess I just had this idea that everybody would be so elite and so above me intellectually that I wouldn’t have any opportunity to really fit in. I was intimidated, I guess, a little bit. And I’m not normally intimidated by much, so I think that was a healthy thing actually. The book I wrote with a friend who actually graduated from our nemesis, Harvard [laughter]—and he is relentless in his criticism of me for choosing Yale, but I feel good about my choice.

**Peter:** No, you made the right choice. No doubt about it.

And the book, say a little bit more about the book.

**James:** You know, we get joked by guys in Andrew’s former organization, in the Rangers, and, you know, the army is like, “Hey, is there a Navy SEAL that hasn’t written a book?” And I would say, “Well, it’s because the Army guys don’t know how to write.” [Laughter] But there are very few people on the face of the earth that are tougher than Andrew’s former crew, and I did many missions with those guys, and I have a lot of respect for them. So all joking aside, man, those dudes are pretty amazing.

The book really for me was, I actually was on a mission one night in Iraq, and I saw some things unfold that were absolutely shocking to me. People need to know, you know, what we’re seeing—not the tough-guy stuff, not the chest-beater stuff, but the kind of the humanity of it. And it’s certainly not the *Iliad*, but I really felt like I needed to explain a little bit about the combat stuff, and then I really struggled mightily after I came home, after I was wounded, and the military was my life. And I didn’t really think that I had much to offer after that. And so through the help of friends and professionals, I got better, and I got pointed in a different direction. Given the amount of suicide and the difficulties that veterans have transitioning from the military to the next part of life, and finding an opportunity for them to serve, I felt like that was super important to convey. So I wanted the anti-chest-beater “Hey, I really struggled and people helped me” story, and that’s kind of that arc that I wanted. And my buddy, God bless him, you know, he knew how to structure it, and he understood the right way to go at those things, and I’m really grateful; he made it a really good book.

**Peter:** Thank you. It’s a wonderful story. Andrew, how about you? I did read something you wrote in the *Yale Daily News* where you were beginning your journey at Yale, and you talked about feeling out of place as a freshman who had served as an Army Ranger, and then things changed. And I think what changed, maybe, is that you went to France with the Yale Summer Session. Is that true?

**Andrew:** Yes, President Salovey, I appreciate you taking time to read that, first of all. It was not my first thought to write that. When I was in France for that one month, there was this writing program—a really good writing program, travel writing—I’m in Auvillar, France, no WiFi, no internet. You just do pretty much an essay a day and you’re living with these twelve other students. In the last week we had to write our final macro essay, and this is kind of what I wrote, the compilation of all the time in isolation, having time to think and being with the others. And I submitted it and that was my final essay. But then one of my friends who read it, he worked with the YDN [*Yale Daily News*], and he said for me to publish it as an op-ed. And I was kind of hesitant at first. I didn’t really want to release this type of…these thoughts that I had, you know, because they were for me. But I did realize after a little bit of thinking that it was really for the other vets, other veterans and other students who were coming out of the military and going into school, and were having that struggle, the silent struggle, which they can’t really talk to others about and didn’t have a medium to voice their opinions, and I did. So writing the story was kind of my way to put a voice to them. And I did get some feedback about it. I did not expect it—feedback from others, from across the world, who were serving in military services, who were veterans with similar ideas, and I kind of put into words what they were thinking, and through that, they didn’t have to really try to tell their family or their friends. They kind of, they could just send that article. So it was kind of amazing to see the effects of it, which I didn’t expect.

**Peter:** It’s great that you were willing to share those experiences. And so now you’re a junior, and when you think back of how you felt at the time—your sense of isolation as a freshman, the transformation over the last two years, the summer in France. How did you go from feeling alone, essentially, to becoming an integral member of the Yale community?

**Andrew:** Trying to look back, it was a metamorphosis of types, you know. The first semester was definitely for me just the most difficult, just like I explained in the paper. I didn’t have any reason to be, really. We just heard from Jimmy who has incredible stories, men like him who spent that long a service with those type of guys, doing that type of work. They lay the groundwork for guys, young guys like me, to kind of even take a jab at that type of service and then come out. Coming to Yale immediately after coming out of Ranger Regiment, you know, I got out of service in August, and then I just came up here and moved in. So that kind of initial, that shock, you know being around eighteen-year-olds, and I was twenty-three at the time. I just looked different, and I didn’t live on campus. It was a lot going on.Like I mentioned in the paper, I hadn’t taken a lot of these subjects like gen chem since 2011. So I didn’t really understand what was going on and I didn’t live on campus. That was one of the bigger things where I couldn’t really go back and hang out with that essential core crew of freshmen or first-years that you were with. So like that kind of carried through and then with the school work…the first year was a tough one, but then I went on that trip to France, wrote the paper, had a good group of friends coming out. And the second year I really made a focus to get involved, stay around campus, hang out with the people, with the new first-years, sophomores in my grade, and get involved in different groups. And you get out of it, you know, what you put in. Like when I started putting in the time to really understand my classmates and really taking that one quote that I took from my paper where like “they don’t have to understand me to care about me.” Yeah, they’ll never understand like our side, veterans, but they still care about us. They’re still interested and there’s no reason for us to shut them out. That kind of change, that mindset shift, which I push upon other veterans. The one thing if could say—just being here, I don’t want to be the veteran on campus. I don’t want that identity. I just want to be the student who served in the past, and I think that’s what’s helped me.

**Peter:** Allegra, you know, you’re balancing right now active duty in the Marines while attending Yale College. Just how do you do that?

**Allegra:** So I’m really lucky in that my job in the Marine Corps right now is to go to school, also to participate in NROTC, but primarily to go to school. So I’ve really had the chance to focus on academics and being involved in the Yale community. I guess, in short, it’s just been very fun. I’ve done things here that I wouldn’t have imagined doing before I started. I played a couple seasons on the Yale rugby team, and I’ve never played rugby before so that was fun. I know that’s something that Andrew did as well. I also had the opportunity to do some research in Yale’s Political Violence [Field] Lab. So it’s just been a very good experience for me to have an opportunity to focus on different things.

**Peter:** Tell me a little bit more about your program in the Marines. So you were an active duty Marine, and then they say to you, we want you to go to college and we want you to be part of ROTC because they’re training you for a leadership position. Is that how it works?

**Allegra:** Correct. So I’m currently enlisted, and there are different pathways from going from being an enlisted service member to a commissioned officer. So the path that I decided to take was the one where you remain on active duty, and you go to school full-time with an ROTC unit.

**Peter:** So as you all know, Yale has a proud tradition of involvement in and ties to military service. So many students, alumni, faculty, and staff have served. But I’d like to ask each of you a question, which is really about each of you, and that is why did you decide to serve, and how did you make that decision? Let me start with you, Allegra, and then we’ll go in reverse order.

**Allegra:** So I think like a lot of eighteen-year-olds, I was looking for a way to go to college debt free. And beyond that, I was kind of just looking for something a little more exciting than going to college. At the time that’s what I thought. Now I’ll say it’s very exciting, but it actually happened that the home that I grew up in, there was a Marine Corps recruiting station right across the street from my house.

**Peter:** Where was that?

**Allegra:** In Wichita, Kansas. So it wasn’t anything that I had ever looked at or thought twice about. And the Marine Corps is very good at recruiting. And they really sold me on the physical toughness and the difficulty aspect of the Marine Corps.

**Peter:** And, Andrew, how about you? How did you make the decision to join the service?

**Andrew:** So, I actually wanted to become a Navy SEAL at first. That was my number one goal. But my vision was not good, was not up to par. I had glasses, and you can’t wear glasses when you dive and whatnot. So I went to school for two years after high school. Then after, I decided, you know, I wanted to really get back in it, and I saw the different options within the Army, and I chose what I thought was the hardest one and fit my personality type. So that’s how I found Ranger Regiment, and it was all stemmed and rooted within patriotism and trying to fight for the freedom that my parents escaped their country for, and then a little bit of bravado, too, just trying to see if, as a young man, if I could keep up with these type of guys. So that’s why I chose the unit that I did.

**Peter:** A Ranger, a SEAL and a Marine. There’s a theme here among our Yalies who are in the service. You’re all picking not the easiest roads. Jimmy, how did you how did you make the decision to join the service?

**James:** President Salovey, I love this question. I grew up reading war stories, and I didn’t spend a lot of time reading Steinbeck or Hemingway or any of the things that I was assigned in school. And so to me, it was a function of family, really. I knew that in the military I would have to prove my ability to perform, and that in exchange for that, I would be with other people who were invested and wanted to perform. And I really wanted to be a part of what I saw at the time as a corrective force. I realize now that I’m older that there are a lot of different nuances that go into that. But as young man it was pretty much that simple for me.

**Peter:** I would like to ask you about your plans for after graduation. We’re getting hints of all of that. Medical school, commissions, etc. But why don’t you say a little bit more about what you wish to do after Yale, and how you see the combination of your military experience and your Yale education affecting your future endeavors. How about if we start with Andrew on this one?

**Andrew:** I hinted earlier, I’m hoping to go to medical school after graduation. Specifically, I want to study surgery, a long road for orthopedics hopefully, but kind of the combination of my military experience and my Yale education… My military experience kind of gave me that worldly view, kind of showed me the precariousness of life, the fragility. So coming out of that and seeing the other side of humanity. Both sides of humanity. But seeing the other side of humanity, seeing the pain and the struggle that’s there in the world led me to go to Yale and pursue something where—not something necessarily that would make me happy. For me that’s not really what I’m pursuing, but something I find meaningful, something I’d be good at, something that can make an impact in the world. If I could decrease the suffering in the world just a little bit, and coming to Yale, surrounding myself with students who undoubtedly make me better every single day based off their excellence and their standards, and then the doors that Yale can open to me, to work with a specialist in that field. Hopefully when I come out, when I finish my complete education and get into an actual job or occupation, that I could make a difference and decrease that suffering the world just a little bit. That’s my goal.

**Peter:** Sounds like a great goal to me. Allegra, what happens when you graduate? You get your commission and you’re a Yale graduate and what happens next?

**Allegra:** Correct. So after that I’ll go to a training course called the Basic School, which every Marine Corps officer goes through. I also think that this is one of the most exciting times to be in the Marine Corps. We’re transitioning from the last twenty years that we spent in the Middle East to kind of focusing on the Asia-Pacific region. So I hope that my degree and my studies in global affairs will prepare me to be a better leader in that realm. And then I also think, most importantly, the diversity of thought that I’ve been exposed to here at Yale, both in the classes that I have taken and the professors that I’ve met and in the other students that I’ve had the opportunity to learn alongside—that’s really just given me a different experience that I didn’t have in the Marine Corps and that’s going to make me a better leader when I go back.

**Peter:** I’m delighted to hear that. Jimmy, your service has concluded but your Yale education has not yet. I’m wondering what you have planned for post-graduation.

**James:** Well, sir, I get a little emotional thinking about it. But, you know, I want to be an asset to my nation. I think here at Yale, like Andrew’s mentioned, and Allegra as well, you know, you’re surrounded by people who are motivated and want to create something good or something better than what we have, and I think at some point—I have this nonprofit I really want to continue to push it, taking care of working canines. My life was saved on multiple occasions by those dogs, and I just want to make sure that they’re taken care of—but ideally, what I’d like to do is be…hopefully, in my next few years at Yale I’ll learn to be less of a blunt force trauma in conversations, and I would like to get some invites into those rooms where decisions are made about sending other people’s children, like Allegra, to war. I think in our society, at least in my experience, we’re in a place where many of the decision-makers are not familiar with the realities of some of the decisions or the effects of some of the decisions that they will make. I think I could be a good voice in that room, hopefully, if I’m a little more polished and I have a very good background in the classics. That’s kind of my long-term goal. I really want to be there when people are making those types of decisions about our nation and other people’s kids, by and large.

**Peter:** Very inspiring and makes me emotional hearing you say that. I wish all three of you the opportunity to pursue your dreams and that those dreams get to come true for you.

Jimmy, Andrew, Allegra: thank you so much. Thank you for joining me for Veterans Day, and I’m grateful for all that you’ve contributed to our country and what you continue to do and will do. I especially appreciate that you chose to study at Yale and to add your experiences, expertise, and talents to our university. And I know your classmates benefit from your being among them.

To friends and members of the Yale community, thank you for joining me for Yale Talk on Veterans Day. 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.