

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

*Episode 47: Secretary John Kerry on the Climate Crisis*

*Guest: John Kerry, the sixty-eighth U.S. Secretary of State, first Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, and former U.S. senator from Massachusetts*

*Description: In one of his first interviews since stepping down as the inaugural Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, Secretary John Kerry joins Yale President Peter Salovey for an Earth Day conversation about his environmental leadership and how to build political will for climate action.*

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### FULL TRANSCRIPT

**President Salovey:** Hello everyone, I'm Peter Salovey and welcome to a very special edition of Yale Talk. Today we join communities around the globe in observing Earth Day. Yale's greatest strength, our vital contribution to environmental efforts, is the leadership necessary to tackle our most pressing global challenges, including climate change. And my guest today, the 68th U.S. Secretary of State and first Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, exemplifies our highest ideals as an institution dedicated to improving the world for this and future generations. Secretary Kerry, ever since your Yale College days, you've been working to fulfill your rights and responsibilities toward your fellow citizens by promoting international peace, environmental justice, oceanic stewardship, and your inspiring dedication to this university, including, of course, through the Jackson School's Kerry Initiative, continues to empower the next generation of leaders who, like you, seek to serve and to solve great global challenges. It is a very great honor to welcome you. Thank you for joining me on Yale Talk.

**Secretary Kerry:** Thank you, Peter. It's my privilege to be with you. Thanks a lot.

**President Salovey:** Thank you for giving us the time. So Yale was one of the many campuses that celebrated the very first Earth Day in 1970, and it was originally billed as a national teach-in on the environment. At the time you were a young Yale graduate, you had arrived back from Vietnam. You were one of the millions of Americans who participated in the first Earth Day. And I'm wondering if you can share some of your reflections from that day in 1970, and maybe capture some memories and the enthusiasm of that moment fifty years ago?

**Secretary Kerry:** Well, it was mightily enthusiastic, driven by a lot of idealism and a lot of concern about where we were headed. It's important to reflect that in 1962, when I matriculated as a freshman at Yale, Rachel Carson's extraordinary work, *Silent Spring*, was published, and Rachel died two years later of cancer. But her impact through that and her incredible writing, which was serialized in *The New Yorker*, in *The Atlantic*, *Reader's Digest*, she was well known, but she tackled this challenge of DDT, which was being sprayed openly on Americans. It was extraordinary. In communities, kids, swimming pool, whole populations on Long Island, where retired bombers of World War II were refitted and were just flying up and down Long Island spreading DDT. So this was an amazing fight that she engaged in against the largest chemical companies in the world. And she fought for the truth. And a lot of us in that period of time had

become involved. While at Yale, we were involved in the Mississippi voter registration drive. We were involved in the Vietnam War debates, a whole series of public issues which inundated us. And at the end of the sixties, you couldn't see across Los Angeles or New York City for the smog and for the lack of quality of air. The Cuyahoga River in Ohio famously caught on fire. So we were all inspired to say, 'enough is enough.' This is pollution. Humans are doing this, and we have to respond. And we did respond. In the first Earth Day, we mobilized, bringing twenty million Americans out of their homes to protest. But we did more than protest. We targeted the twelve worst votes on the environment in the House of Representatives, labeled them the Dirty Dozen, campaigned in their districts around the country in that election, and indeed, seven of the twelve were defeated. The result of that was what happens in politics when these politicians, who aren't driven by an ideological foundation or by some particular issue, suddenly see their colleagues losing. They realize, whoops, this is a voting issue. Even Richard Nixon, who was then president, realized that. And so ultimately, out of Earth Day and citizen action came the Clean Air Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act, Coastal Zone Management Act, the Endangered Species Act, and most importantly, the Environmental Protection Agency was created. And President Richard Nixon, who was not known as an environmentalist, signed it into law. So this was just a hugely active, exciting moment in our history, which made one hell of a difference, and is making a difference today because we've reauthorized the Clean Air Act, the EPA is enforcing a lot of these rules. And with the challenge of the climate crisis, we have our work really cut out for us.

**President Salovey:** Yeah, things have changed though in fifty years. I'm remembering the same time, 1970, I was in high middle school in suburban Buffalo, New York, and we were celebrating Earth Day and following the legislation that you all were proposing. By 1975, I was living in Los Angeles in that smog, finishing high school. And remember just how dirty that air was. We lived in the South Bay and you looked north and you couldn't see the mountains at all in those days. But I think about 1970, and I think about you persuading the Nixon administration to support you, so there's at least some bipartisan interest. Now, fifty years later, it's sometimes hard to convince people that scientific findings support policy changes, even when they see wildfires and drought and flooding and other kinds of catastrophic climate emergencies. They throw up their hands and say, we can't do anything about it. And so I'm interested in what you think we need to do to help the people who still don't believe global climate change is real, actually come to a different understanding of it. What do we need to do?

**Secretary Kerry:** Well, Peter, we need to be active again. There's no magic wand here. You can't talk it into not happening. You have to act. And if our political leaders won't act, then we have to find new political leaders. I'm glad to say that President Biden and his appointment of a special envoy, but also in policies he's pursued, is acting more than any president has in history. So the presidency is not the problem right now. The problem is a Congress where you have a whole party--I don't want to be partisan--but you have a whole party that won't vote for anything with the word climate in it.

**President Salovey:** Yeah.

**Secretary Kerry:** And there's this new orthodoxy that has been adopted. I thought about this a lot as the eclipse engulfed a certain portion of America. And I said to myself, you know, think about it, we have just seen everybody in the country immersed in the meaning of this remarkable thing, which has been predicted to the second, which every American followed. Nobody had a debate about whether the sun is going to be closed out by the moon, or when it's going to happen. We watch to the second, as science told us, here's what's going to happen and unfold. But guess what? Those same scientists all around the world are telling us the same thing about climate. And yet, as you say, people don't respond. So I think we have no choice. Honestly, no choice. I racked my brain about this one and there isn't a magic wand. We have to be active. One of the greatest words in the English language is citizen, and people have been working on that since the Greeks and others debated it in the early times. We have to get citizens again who will stand up and fight for the truth, and it will take on powerful interests that are completely prepared to put billions of dollars behind the status quo in order to keep the easy flow of revenue from the way they're doing business today, rather than change: move to clean energy, move to clean electricity, begin to produce products that are not creating as much emissions and doing as much damage. It's the only way to get where we need to go. Now, in fact, I'm encouraged. We're behind. We're not where we need to be to keep the Earth's temperature increase at 1.5°C, but we're a hell of a lot better off than we were before President Biden came into office. And this is not an advertisement. When I took over this job, we were headed to about three and a half to four degrees of warming on the planet. Now, by consensus, we understand we're headed about two and a half degrees. We need to go even faster to reduce the rate at which we're doing the damage that we're doing today. And that means speeding up the transition to alternative renewable energy and pushing accountability for the emissions that people are putting up into the atmosphere, which are doing the damage.

**President Salovey:** We have found, through Yale's Program on Climate Change Communication, that when you talk to people about severe weather events, and talk to farmers about crops and crop yields, people listen. People want to engage. They're willing to express their concern. They're willing to get on board. Sometimes talking about climate, it's too abstract. But when you talk about those crops not coming in, it gets much more concrete.

**Secretary Kerry:** Totally.

**President Salovey:** People are willing to be part of the conversation.

**Secretary Kerry:** You're right on target.

**President Salovey:** You know, one of the things that seems to have changed, and you alluded to in a minute ago, is just how politically polarizing this all has become, when in 1970, in some ways, it wasn't. You've made a career, really, of reaching across party lines, of reaching out to allies from business, from the military, from religious leaders. Is this a situation where building those kind of bridges is going to be the key once again?

**Secretary Kerry:** Absolutely, Peter, without any question whatsoever. We just had, as I think you know, the 28th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP), which is the UN process to bring nations together to deal with this issue. We met in Dubai last December, and the outcome of that was really quite astonishing, because we did bring oil and gas companies to the table. We brought people who have a vested interest, and out of that came a consensus which was really quite dramatic. And that consensus is that two hundred nations embraced the language. We must transition away from fossil fuel. We have to do it in a way that's fair and orderly and equitable. We have to accelerate our efforts, in this decade. It was very specific about increasing activity now, and it has to target a plan to have net-zero emissions by 2050. And finally, it used the important phrase, 'according to the science,' that's a code sort of phrase, but that means 1.5 degrees has to remain the target. So all in all, that's the most powerful statement since the Paris Agreement was passed in 2015. And it really demands action now. There are already people trying to walk back from some of that. It's not going to happen automatically because the words were put on a piece of paper. So we're going to have to push very, very hard. I think universities have to play a critical role in this. We need to be convening more of the players, the people involved. We need students to be across the country joining together to demand that people are going to adhere to the words they've put out in these important communiqués. And hopefully out of this will come the level of activity that's going to win the battle. Now, one addendum: I don't think government is going to wind up solving this problem. There's not enough money in any government treasury to deploy the trillions that we need to affect this transition. So we have no choice if we're going to really be serious about pursuing a solution. We have to bring the private sector into this process. There, there are the trillions of dollars. And we have to create the financial instruments and the tools that will attract that capital so that investors can make money. It's not going to happen on the cheap without any initiative to invest. But investing we're already seeing about \$1.7 trillion is now in venture capital and in investment in clean hydrogen, new storage, new batteries, longer lasting, fusion, for instance, carbon capture and storage. There's just a host of enterprise that has been excited by the money now moving where it sees the potential of making money in this transition itself. And that's how it works. We transitioned in the 1800s in the Industrial Revolution. Everybody thought in the 1990s, people were only going to be out of work because we discovered communications equipment that we never used before. We came up with word processors, which then translated into personal computers. And guess what? The unemployment rate in the United States is 3.7%. We have plenty of opportunities staring us in the face. 300,000-plus jobs created in the last month. What we need to do is make sure the incentives are correct to elicit the behavior that we need to win the battle.

**President Salovey:** The statement that came out of the most recent COP, I think, is remarkable, and remarkable in its global consensus and in its specificity. And I think many of us were incredibly impressed. And I think this will stimulate economic growth, not inhibit it.

**Secretary Kerry:** Right.

**President Salovey:** Seems exactly right to me.

**Secretary Kerry:** Well, you know, Peter, last year the American economy grew 2.5% and unemployment went down. So we were seeing it. The fastest growing job in America in the last three years was wind turbine technician. And the third fastest growing job was solar panel installer. So the jobs are there. We need to move faster to embrace the transition.

**President Salovey:** Yeah, it's wise and it's right. Let me move us to Yale. In 2017, you founded the Kerry Initiative. It's an interdisciplinary program within the Jackson School of Global Affairs. It tackles pressing global challenges, includes teaching, research, international dialogue. Can you speak a little bit about experiences working with the Kerry Fellows, building the Jackson School and the Initiative within it?

**Secretary Kerry:** Well, Peter, thanks for raising it. But more importantly, thank you for your personal support for this and your vision of it. You're the one who kind of really pushed the idea with Jim Levinson at the school. It has been a privilege to be able to take part in it.

**President Salovey:** Well, I remember those early conversations with you. It was so exciting when you were thinking about coming to Yale and teaching for us. We were giddy, actually, with the possibility.

**Secretary Kerry:** And now that you've had a few years of me, you're no longer giddy.

**President Salovey:** Yeah. No, no, we're still excited.

**Secretary Kerry:** It's all right. I'm just kidding. It's really been exciting. It's a lot of fun. I mean, first of all, the students are so incredibly bright and capable already, and most of them who came in to the fellowship program had already been involved in some way or another, either in the military outside, or in business, or in their summer employment and previous employment. What we've been doing in the time that I have been the envoy, it's been very capably managed by my former chief of staff at the State Department and in the Senate, David Wade, he's a terrific teacher himself. I'm hoping to come back and pick up the Initiative and continue to engage with the students. We have both graduate students, undergraduate students. We try to get some sampling from almost every school on the campus. And it's a real feast of interdisciplinary engagement, where people explore the kinds of issues we've just been talking about, but much broader: Gaza, Ukraine, global engagement, developing nation policy. And we have some very, very lively discussions and a lot of work is done. They do a lot of research on current issues. The oceans, for instance, there's a big oceans conference coming up in Athens. It's something I started as secretary. This will be the 10th iteration, and next year it'll go to Korea. So it's been moving around the world, but it has resulted in major activity taking place to help deal with the problem of the oceans, which are really, truly threatened on a global basis by overfishing, by pollution, by acidity from the rain that comes as a consequence of the greenhouse gases that are up in the atmosphere that changes the chemistry of the ocean itself, which has an impact on all living life within the ocean. So it's really fascinating. And some of these folks from the fellowship have

come to Washington. Several of them are working in the State Department. One of them is a top aide to the top negotiator for the COP process. Many Yale students have been able to be at these COPs through the years, and I think it's a great exchange, if you will. There are people with great experience who come and lecture or share in the seminar discussion, and then there are folks who come to Washington or take part in some other enterprise through the year themselves, of their own initiative. And in the end, we all really gain from each other. It's a great learning experience, and the students who have taken part in it have felt really good about it.

**President Salovey:** In that context, we should talk about the transition that you are making. You are our country's first Special Presidential Envoy for Climate. This is a cabinet-level position. You serve on the National Security Council in that position. You've been fighting for climate change reduction for quite some time, and you're obviously not stepping down from that fight, but you are leaving that position. What happens next?

Well, Peter, the language I just quoted to you about transitioning away from fossil fuel and accelerating in this decade, that language is as powerful as any statement of purpose or a mission statement could be. The task now is not to run around parroting the language. The task now is to implement. Implement the technology transition, implement the deployment of technology we have today. Speed up the effort to get either experimentation or full deployment of new technologies. We just have to speed up what we're doing and bring it to scale. So that's what I'm going to be doing. You're right, I'm not retiring. But I hope to continue being personally engaged with Yale on the Initiative, but most importantly, probably helping to deploy those trillions of dollars that are absolutely the *sine qua non* of our ability to be able to win this battle. If we do not deploy trillions of dollars, if we don't bring to scale the current level of technology we have, which could get us our 43% reduction by 2030, that's the goal. But we're not deploying it. And one of the reasons we don't deploy it is NIMBYism (Not In My Backyard), or vested interest interference with the process. I'll give you an example. A major automobile company in Korea is lobbying not to transition to electric vehicles. They just want to keep making the internal combustion engine cars. We can't do that. And if a major corporate entity is pushing like that, it has impact and it gets in the way. We have to really push back on those activities. And I think what we need to do is do everything possible for the developing world, for the emerging economies, to be able to not just feel the bitter downside of what is happening because they're the ones worst affected, but also to help them in the transition, to be able to put in new energy systems. They can't afford much of it today. We have to find--with the World Bank, with philanthropy, with a mix of concessionary funding--we have to find the ways to be able to not further disadvantage those entities. And that's the task. That's what I'm going to be doing, is trying to help deploy the money and show a lot of people in the world that you can actually make money and create jobs, have a stronger economy, have a cleaner world, have a more secure world, not be threatened to send people to fight a war in some other part of the world because you have to defend your source of energy. You build it, you make it at home. And there are ways we can do that, and we just have to get about the business of doing it. And I'm going to try as much as I can to hold folks accountable to that task.

**President Salovey:** It's wonderful. And you're a source of inspiration for somebody such as myself. I'm stepping down from the presidency of Yale this summer, but I'm going to stay active at Yale. We have a Planetary Solutions Project that is campus-wide, that I'll continue to promote and try to raise money for. And then we're building a living village, and we've accepted the Living Village Challenge. We have goals for net neutrality in the next decade, but ultimately no carbon emissions by 2050 and no fossil fuel use, and the like. And we're making great progress there. We track ourselves every year with every new project that comes online. The only buildings we build are zero carbon ready, at minimum.

**Secretary Kerry:** Peter, that's exactly what has to be done. And congratulations to you and Yale for doing it. And I know you began the initiative a number of years ago, reducing pollution or reducing CO<sub>2</sub> on the campus as a whole.

**President Salovey:** We're working hard on it. My predecessor, Rick Levin, in this role was very committed to it, and I'm committed to it as well. And I think we've now had thirty years of getting going, and we'll meet our goals in the coming decades. Secretary Kerry, I want to thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. This has been a wonderful conversation. Thank you so much.

**Secretary Kerry:** Peter, thank you.

**President Salovey:** I end with a quote from Gifford Pinchot, who was the first US Forest Chief, but also the founder of the Yale Forest School, which is now our School of the Environment. And he said, "the vast possibilities of our great future will become realities only if we make ourselves responsible for that future." And I join your many Yale friends, indeed individuals all over the globe, in gratitude for the ways you have fulfilled our responsibilities to this planet and to its people.

So to friends and members of the Yale community, thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. And 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.

Kerry Initiative <https://jackson.yale.edu/kerry-initiative/>

Yale Program on Climate Change Communication <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/>

Yale Planetary Solutions <https://planetarysolutions.yale.edu/>

Yale Divinity School Living Village <https://livingvillage.yale.edu/>