ECONOMIC AND MARKET OUTLOOK

Third Quarter 2022

CONGRESS ASSET MANAGEMENT COMPANY

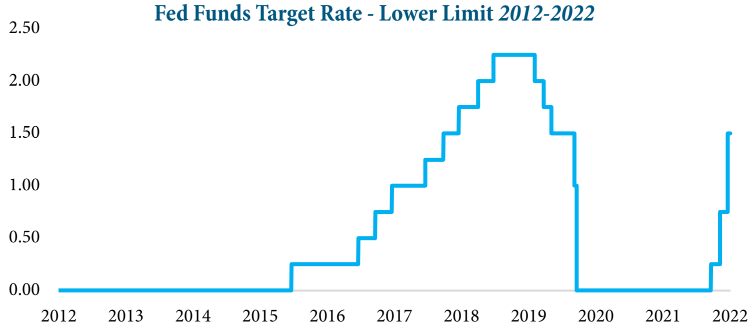
The United States approaches Independence Day caught in a whirlwind of emotions as investors grapple with conflicting economic readings like soaring inflation and softening demand for economically sensitive commodities. The Federal Reserve Governors have turned to restrictive monetary policies while the federal government offers fiscal plans unlikely to blunt rising prices or boost sentiment. Financial markets reflect this uncertainty as both stock and bond volatility remains elevated. Stocks experienced a bear market decline in the first half of the year while the bond market experienced its worst six-month period since the early 1970's. The economic outlook is nebulous, but likely not as dire as sentiment or headlines suggest.

Contrasting economic reports have their genesis in the strong labor market that followed the Great Financial Crisis in 2008 and the overwhelming federal government response through both fiscal and monetary policy to the pandemic. The decade prior to COVID-19 bore the best labor market since World War II. There was little slack, but wages and benefits rose along with productivity helping to keep inflation in check. After the pandemic, the labor force shrank, partly from lifestyle choices and partly from government incentives intended to offset lost wages. With fewer people returning to the labor force, compensation is now rising greater than productivity, stoking price spikes. Fiscal stimulus half worked. It enabled consumers to spend and maintain their lifestyles yet failed to help producers increase supply resulting in shortages in goods of all types.

The Federal Reserve (Fed) repeatedly acknowledged the threat sustained inflation presents and has reiterated its commitment to achieving price stability. The Fed accelerated its inflation fight by raising interest rates two times during the quarter and by allowing its balance sheet to shrink, thereby decreasing the supply of money embedded in the banking system. The federal funds interest rate has been hiked by 1.5% this year, making borrowing more expensive. Higher rates have and will continue to effect capital allocation decisions for companies and consumers, but a recession is not a foregone conclusion despite the Fed's newfound hawkishness.

A Newly-Hawkish Fed

Fed Funds Target Rate - Lower Limit *2012-2022*

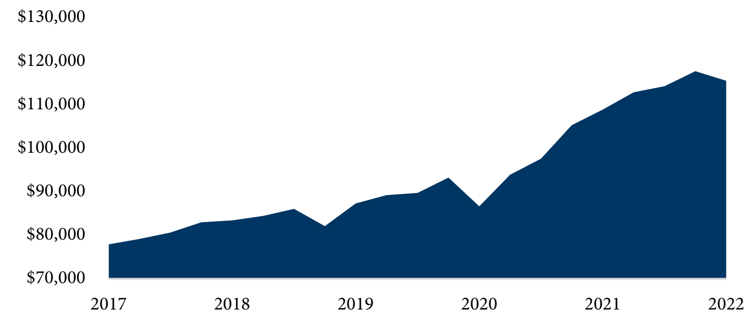


Source: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System

In the current environment the most important determinant for continued economic expansion is the state of the consumer and their willingness to spend. After two years of cash accumulation with constrained spending opportunities, households now have $116 trillion in cash, up 33% from two years ago. In addition, thanks to a decade of low interest rates, debt service is low. Inflation is biting, but not yet crushing the consumer.

Consumers Have Cash on Hand to Spend

U.S. Household Liquid Assets (Billions $) 2017-2022

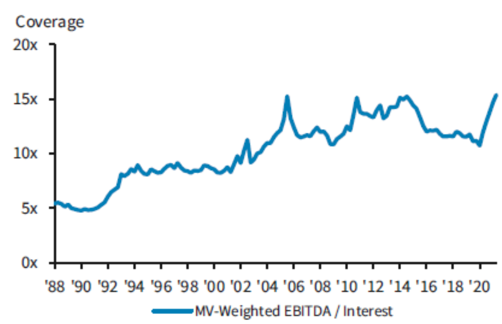


Source: FactSet, Federal Reserve System

Unlike 2008, we do not have a systemic leverage problem for either individuals or corporations. Debt accumulated over the past few years is at low rates and the related interest obligations are not draconian. As such a "credit contagion" similar to 2008 is unlikely. Proper use of leverage would help temper any downturn.

U.S. Corporate Interest Burden Appears Manageable

U.S. Corporate Index ex-Financials Coverage 1988-2022



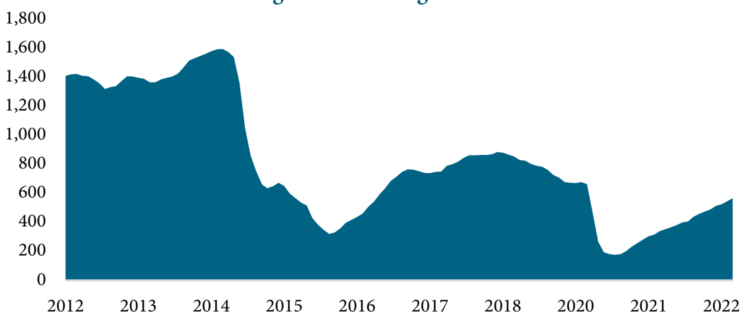
Source: Barclays Research, Bloomberg Indices Note: Excludes Outliers

Many business leaders have issued cautionary economic commentary. This is prudent given the unusual economic state of affairs. However, even with higher inflation, profit margins have held up. Given the difficulty in identifying, hiring, and training workers, employers may be reluctant to cut payroll for what may be a cyclical inflationary period. More acute margin pressures later in the year may indeed push businesses into cost cutting mode. Corporate earnings would be challenged in 2023 should that transpire.

Commodity prices have come off the boil due to lower anticipated growth, some demand destruction, and China's shutdown of Shanghai and Beijing. In the U.S., active oil and gas rigs are up 50% over last year, though still significantly below records achieved last decade in a more supportive scenario for carbon-based product. Delivering supplies of oil and natural gas to needed geographies in time for winter may prove challenging and limit better prices for consumers.

U.S. Oil Production is Ramping Up

Baker Hughes U.S. Oil Rig Count 2017-2022



Source: FactSet, Baker Hughes Company

Outside the U. S., most if not all, of the developed economies are battling both inflation and higher interest rates. Many economies are teetering on the edge of recession and are facing even higher energy prices than the United States. Russia's war on Ukraine is also likely to create more challenges for Europe as the year progresses.

China's economic engine has stalled as its "zero covid" policy resulted in the lockdown of its most important regions for trade and commerce. It is slowly re-opening but combined with a bourgeoning real estate crisis, China is unlikely to grow substantially until next year.

The current macro-economic environment is without precedent. Investors will continue to monitor the Federal Reserve as it walks a tightrope trying to control inflation while maintaining a strong employment market and a growing economy. As important is the adaptability of the U.S. economic system and its constituents. The challenges are real but domestic businesses and organizations have proven time and again that they can respond to new stimuli and new scenarios. That is often lost in the cacophony of daily headlines.

The financial markets have, and will likely continue to, react viscerally to unanticipated economic readings. In our view, long term investors will be rewarded by staying the course – investing in the stocks and bonds of high-quality U.S. companies. Extreme market volatility is often unsettling but should not alter longer term investment programs.

Happy Independence Day

Investment Oversight Committee
Daniel A. Lagan, CFA, President & CIO

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