

A Murky Estuary: New Age Economy Meets 1970s Problems



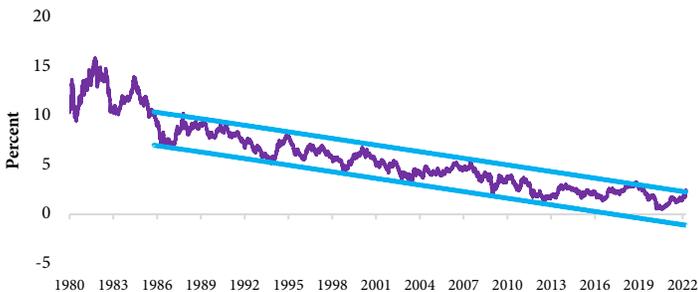
The current economic picture resembles that of an estuary where fresh and salt waters converge, resulting in a brackish, murky, mix.

We are entering a new economic era just two years after Covid began. Trends and practices espoused for decades such as globalization and lean manufacturing have lost their luster. Vestiges of the 1970’s have returned to awaken dormant fears about energy prices and nuclear threats. Our digital economy is now facing analog threats - inflation, shortages, and war. The short-term effects are unnerving, but our economy retains momentum.

Investors are grappling with repercussions of an unjust war in Ukraine and an economy experiencing a rash of recent “high-water mark” readings in metrics long dismissed as fleeting, such as inflation and energy prices. This is not the 1970’s, however. Our economy is more efficient and stronger. By and large, companies are better at adapting to new challenges. Entrepreneurship blossomed over the past two years. Still, the economic outlook is murkier than it was last year.

The uncertainty was reflected during the first quarter’s price action for both stocks and bonds. The S&P 500 gyrated throughout the quarter, rallying in late March to close down about 3% for the period. Interest rates as measured by the U.S. Treasury 10-year note rose to 2.4%, driving bond prices down.

10 Year U.S. Treasury Yield Downward Trend Channel 1980-2022



Source: Congress Asset Management & Bloomberg

Since 1998 and the Long-Term Capital Management hedge fund crisis, investors have become reliant on the Federal Reserve (Fed) to act aggressively to stabilize the markets. Then, the Fed obliged markets and employed quantitative easing for the first time in response to the Great Financial Crisis of 2008-2009. In that case, the Fed was successful in righting the ship, avoiding what could have been an outright depression.

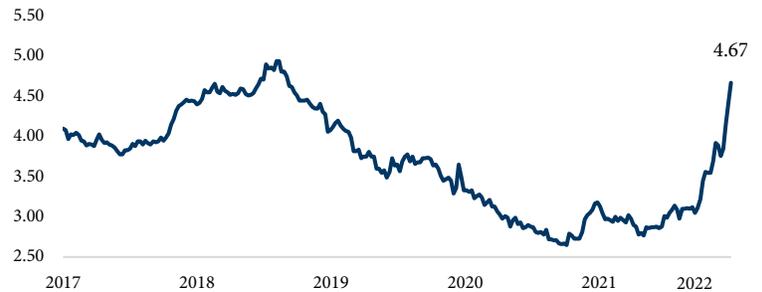
The Fed’s response to the onset of the pandemic in 2020 has largely been seen as successful. That recession, while very sharp, lasted less than two quarters. In hindsight, the Fed may have been too

aggressive, or at a minimum did not react quickly enough when it was clear the economy was booming. Policy reversal is never an easy feat, as such timing and magnitude will be key components for the Fed going forward.

Inflationary pressures continue to rise on many fronts. Pandemic-induced supply constraints are not easing as much as hoped and have been further complicated by the war. Relief may be further delayed by China’s staggered shut down of Shanghai, a city of 25 million people and a vital cog in global commerce. Employment costs continue to rise as a dearth of workers pressures employers of every stripe. Mortgage rates have risen to over 4.6%, making home ownership more expensive. Commodity prices have popped, led by oil and gas. Inflation now acts like a tax, forcing consumers to choose essentials over desires. Longer-term, inflation expectations can have a negative impact on psyche and sentiment.

Home Ownership is Becoming More Expensive

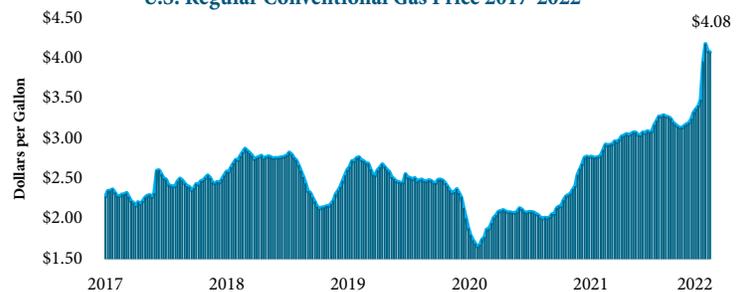
30-Year Fixed Rate Mortgage Average Rate in the U.S. 2017-2022



Source: Freddie Mac

Pain at the Pump is Part of an Inflationary Sting

U.S. Regular Conventional Gas Price 2017-2022



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration

Aside from inflation, Russia’s attack on Ukraine is causing the world to reassess its priorities, with European nations threatened by proximity and trading ties. Europe had become reliant on Russia for much of its energy, importing vast amounts of natural gas out of expediency and to satisfy environmental goals. Regardless of the duration or outcome of Russia’s war in Ukraine, Europe will need to shift its spending priorities. Spending on energy production and defense will increase. Europe’s trading patterns will favor European and western allies that do not pose an existential threat to their existence.

The domestic impact of the Russian attack is far less stark. Russia’s share of the global economy is about 3% and direct trade with the U.S. is inconsequential. Many U.S. companies ceased Russian activities early on. Instead, our most immediate financial challenges are domestic and revolve around inflation, interest rates, and consumer spending.

Inflation remains elevated, alarmingly so. Investors' confidence that the Fed can engineer a soft landing (a period of slower growth without a recession) while also lowering inflation, is being tested. The Fed has gradually become more "hawkish," forecasting more and larger hikes in the overnight lending rate. Yet, the Fed continued to purchase government bonds into March, expanding its balance sheet further and pumping even more cash into a strong economy. The Fed's current goal of damping inflation without causing a recession may be more difficult than the challenges offered by the pandemic or the Great Financial Crisis.

The Fed's forthcoming rate increases are unlikely to materially hinder domestic growth, at least in the intermediate term. The Omicron variant has passed for now and the shock of Russia's initial attacks on Ukraine has waned, restoring consumer confidence. Importantly, there are over 11 million job openings. As people return to the work force, they will find ample opportunities with good wages. Filling those jobs should help solidify growth, increase spending, and, perhaps, soften inflationary impacts.

The pandemic and related supply issues have laid bare the need for a renaissance in U.S. productive capacity. Supply chains need to shorten and inventory levels need to rise. While subtle, satisfying these needs will increase capital expenditures over the next few years. The housing market remains strong and the desire for hybrid work environments is forcing employers to upgrade technology systems and software.

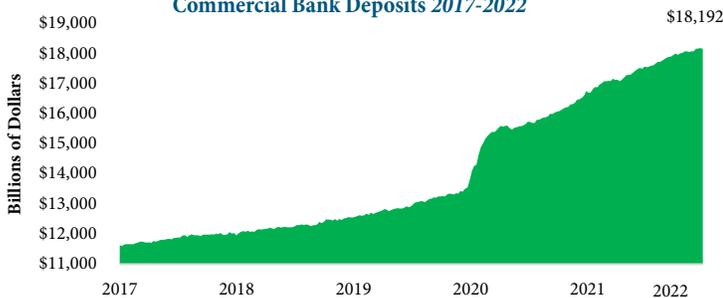
Fortunately, funding for capital projects is ample and supportive of continued growth. Domestic commercial banks have \$18 trillion in deposits, a record high, much of it available to loan. The corporate bond market is also vibrant, indicating companies' willingness to invest and investors' willingness to lend.

In spite of the challenges, corporate earnings should increase about 10% in 2022. While not advancing at the heady pace of 2021, it should be enough to support stocks as the year progresses. Bonds offer more favorable yields than a year ago and provide a level of safety during these more uncertain times.

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

An Abundance of Available Capital

Commercial Bank Deposits 2017-2022



Source: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System

The economy can withstand the Fed's proposed rate hikes. How successful the Fed will be in containing inflation remains unknown. The deleterious effects of inflation compound over time and can weaken an economy's foundation to its core. By adopting a more aggressive tone, the Fed is implicitly acknowledging this risk.

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