



Weekly Focus – Think About It

“Some narratives go viral because they contain real truth and knowledge and are useful. I’m more concerned with the other kinds of narratives that are story-quality, interesting, stimulating, fun—and travel person to person. They have a high contagion rate. Changes in public thinking are revealed by them and changes in public thinking are important causes of major economic events.”

Robert Shiller, economist

Best regards,

THE MARKETS

AND WE’RE OFF...TO A SLOW START

Last week, investors appeared to suffer from a New Year’s hangover. The culprit was too much optimism.

After its December meeting, with inflation easing and the U.S. economy remaining resilient, the United States Federal Reserve (Fed) indicated that three rate cuts were possible in 2024. Assuming the Fed drops rates by 0.25 percentage points each time, the effective federal funds rate would fall by 0.75 percentage points to about 4.5 percent by the end of this year.

That was welcome news. Lower rates make borrowing less expensive for businesses and consumers. As a result, rate cuts could lead to lower interest rates on home and auto loans, as well as credit cards. In addition, lower rates could boost corporate profits and push stock prices higher.

Ebullient investors saw the inch and took a mile, extrapolating the possibility of three Fed rate cuts in 2024 to six rate cuts. Jeff Cox of *CNBC* explained. “Markets...followed up the meeting and Chair Jerome Powell’s press conference by pricing in an even more aggressive rate-cut path, anticipating 1.5 percentage points in reductions next year, double the [Fed’s] indicated pace.”

Investors’ buoyant outlook supported strong third-quarter performance and double-digit returns for major U.S. stock indices in 2023. However, investors recognized they may have taken things too far, and the U.S. stock market retreated for much of last week.

Friday’s employment report didn’t help matters. It confirmed the continued strength of the U.S. economy. Employers added 216,000 jobs in December, surpassing economists’ estimates,

according to Megan Leonhardt of *Barron's*. The unemployment rate remained at 3.7 percent and average hourly earnings were up 4.1 percent over the 12 months through December 2023.

The strong report lowered expectations that the Fed will cut the federal fund rate at its March meeting, reported Karishma Vanjani of *Barron's*.

Last week, major U.S. stock indices finished the week lower, and the yield on the benchmark 10-year U.S. Treasury note rose.

A Brief Review of 2023

The year was filled with geopolitical uncertainty, including wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and political divisions at home that led to a debt ceiling standoff and a failure to pass funding for the 2024 budget. Here are a few key events from last year:

- **The great AI rally.** In 2023, artificial intelligence (AI) captured the public's imagination. More companies mentioned AI on their quarterly earnings calls than ever before and those that did sometimes saw above-average stock price performance.
- **Slowing inflation.** Inflation was top of mind for consumers and investors last year. Fed rate hikes did what they were supposed to do, and inflation slowed from 6.3 percent in January to 3.1 percent in November.
- **Bank closures.** In March, we saw heightened market volatility after Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank failed in the United States, and Credit Suisse bank collapsed in Switzerland. Quick action by authorities in both countries reassured investors and helped global stocks recover.
- **Economic resilience.** The United States did not have a recession in 2023. Instead, the economy grew steadily and proved remarkably resilient. At year-end, unemployment remained near multi-decade lows, and consumer spending was solid with retail sales up 3.1 percent over the holidays. In addition, wage growth exceeded inflation during the latter half of the year.
- **Economic fizzle.** Many anticipated China's economy would boom after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted. Instead, it fizzled. Amid China's property crisis, the MSCI China Index dropped by more than 14 percent in 2023, reported Tassia Sipahutar, Eliza Ronalds-Hannon, John Cheng and Ye Xie of *Bloomberg*.
- **Tour de force.** "Taylor Swift, Beyoncé and 'Barbenheimer' fever are giving a serious boost to the U.S. economy," reported Augusta Saraiva of *Bloomberg* in late August. "The megastars' tours and blockbuster films are expected to add up to \$8.5 billion to U.S. growth in the third quarter... The nearly 50 U.S. concerts... could add \$5.4 billion [to economic growth], while the films Barbie and Oppenheimer are projected to add about \$3.1 billion in consumer spending and exports from international ticket sales."

- **A refreshing pause.** Investors and consumers breathed a sigh of relief when the Fed paused its rate hiking cycle in July. The Fed left the effective federal funds rate in a 5.25 to 5.5 percent range for the remainder of the year.

With inflation nearing the Fed’s target, some think the U.S. central bank may have managed to tame inflation without leading the country into recession, an achievement known as a “soft landing”. If so, 2024 will indeed be a happy new year!

Data as of 1-5-2023	1-Week	Y-T-D	1-Year	3-Year	5-Year	10-Year
Standard & Poor's 500 (Domestic Stocks)	-1.5%	-1.5%	23.4%	8.0%	13.0%	9.9%
Dow Jones Global ex-U.S.	-1.4	-1.4	9.7	-2.0	3.9	1.6
10-year Treasury Note (Yield Only)	4.0	N/A	3.7	1.0	2.7	3.0
Gold (per ounce)	-1.1	-1.1	12.1	2.0	9.7	5.1
Bloomberg Commodity Index	0.02	0.02	-8.1	7.1	4.7	-2.3

S&P 500, Dow Jones Global ex-US, Gold, Bloomberg Commodity Index returns exclude reinvested dividends (gold does not pay a dividend) and the three-, five-, and 10-year returns are annualized; the DJ Equity All REIT Total Return Index does include reinvested dividends and the three-, five-, and 10-year returns are annualized; and the 10-year Treasury Note is simply the yield at the close of the day on each of the historical time periods. Sources: Yahoo! Finance, Barron's, djindexes.com, London Bullion Market Association. Past performance is no guarantee of future results. Indices are unmanaged and cannot be invested into directly. N/A means not applicable.

THE POWER OF STORIES

Nobel-prize-winning economist Robert Shiller and his colleagues researched what they call “Narrative Economics” and found that popular stories affect our decision-making. In 2023, we witnessed the phenomenon firsthand as the story of the “Magnificent Seven” gathered steam.

For movie buffs (and people of a certain age), the name brings to mind the star-studded 1960s film with a reputation as one of the greatest Westerns of all time. The seven gunmen of the film are the reason pundits adopted the moniker to describe seven technology-related stocks that delivered double-digit returns in 2023.

“Shares of the so-called Magnificent Seven...individually soared between around 50% and 240% in 2023, making them among the market's most rewarding bets... Because of their heavy weightings in the S&P 500...the seven were responsible for nearly two-thirds of the benchmark index’s 24% gain this year,” reported Lewis Krauskopf of *Reuters*.

If the goal of investing is to buy low and sell high, investors would have been better off investing in the Magnificent Seven in 2022 when they delivered a less-than-magnificent performance. Combined, they lost 39 percent that year, according to Joseph Adinolfi of Morningstar, and all seven finished 2022 with double-digit losses.

When the narrative focuses on a broader time horizon and individual share price performance, the story looks quite different. Three of the Magnificent Seven stocks have a negative average annual return over the last two years, three have a positive return, and one delivered a flat performance, reported Matt Krantz of *Investor's Business Daily*.

The Magnificent Seven narrative offered investors an invigorating story. When reading stories about stocks or other investments that are performing well, it's tempting to jump on the bandwagon. If an investment narrative captures your interest, give us a call. We can discuss the pros and cons of the opportunity.

Best regards,

Andrew Zittell
Yerba Buena Financial Partners

Sources:

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* Government bonds and Treasury Bills are guaranteed by the U.S. government as to the timely payment of principal and interest and, if held to maturity, offer a fixed rate of return and fixed principal value. However, the value of fund shares is not guaranteed and will fluctuate.

* Corporate bonds are considered higher risk than government bonds but normally offer a higher yield and are subject to market, interest rate and credit risk as well as additional risks based on the quality of issuer coupon rate, price, yield, maturity, and redemption features.

* The Standard & Poor's 500 (S&P 500) is an unmanaged group of securities considered to be representative of the stock market in general. You cannot invest directly in this index.

* All indexes referenced are unmanaged. The volatility of indexes could be materially different from that of a client's portfolio. Unmanaged index returns do not reflect fees, expenses, or sales charges. Index performance is not indicative of the performance of any investment. You cannot invest directly in an index.

* The Dow Jones Global ex-U.S. Index covers approximately 95% of the market capitalization of the 45 developed and emerging countries included in the Index.

* The 10-year Treasury Note represents debt owed by the United States Treasury to the public. Since the U.S. Government is seen as a risk-free borrower, investors use the 10-year Treasury Note as a benchmark for the long-term bond market.

* Gold represents the 3:00 p.m. (London time) gold price as reported by the London Bullion Market Association and is expressed in U.S. Dollars per fine troy ounce. The source for gold data is Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (FRED), <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/GOLDPMGBD228NLBM>.

* The Bloomberg Commodity Index is designed to be a highly liquid and diversified benchmark for the commodity futures market. The Index is composed of futures contracts on 19 physical commodities and was launched on July 14, 1998.

- * The DJ Equity All REIT Total Return Index measures the total return performance of the equity subcategory of the Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT) industry as calculated by Dow Jones.
- * The Dow Jones Industrial Average (DJIA), commonly known as “The Dow,” is an index representing 30 stock of companies maintained and reviewed by the editors of The Wall Street Journal.
- * The NASDAQ Composite is an unmanaged index of securities traded on the NASDAQ system.
- * International investing involves special risks such as currency fluctuation and political instability and may not be suitable for all investors. These risks are often heightened for investments in emerging markets.
- * Yahoo! Finance is the source for any reference to the performance of an index between two specific periods.
- * The risk of loss in trading commodities and futures can be substantial. You should therefore carefully consider whether such trading is suitable for you in light of your financial condition. The high degree of leverage is often obtainable in commodity trading and can work against you as well as for you. The use of leverage can lead to large losses as well as gains.
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