

PERITUS

ASSET MANAGEMENT, LLC

Active Credit

Independent Credit Research – Leveraged Finance – March 2016

THE ZERO SUM GAME

As we close out the first quarter of 2016, investors reading the tea leaves should be concerned. The price collapse in almost all commodities and the recent severe indigestion in US credit markets reject the notion that the global economy is going to grow at a rate greater than 3%. Japan and Europe are focusing on further Quantitative Easing to try and stimulate any growth, while China has run the limits of building ghost cities. With three of the four largest economies showing zero growth (don't believe China's data) and the implosion of emerging markets (such as Russia and Brazil) the idea that the US economy will be unaffected is not realistic. Demographics remain the elephant in the room and whether they are causal to all of this or merely an accomplice is irrelevant. The zero sum game and the fight for market shares has already begun leading to deflationary trends globally. Against this backdrop, we expect credit to not only outperform equities in 2016 but for an extended period of time as stock market valuations begin to compress given both a decline in earnings and, most importantly, a long term outflow from both institutional and retail investors.

Our thoughts on the US economy are broken down as follows:

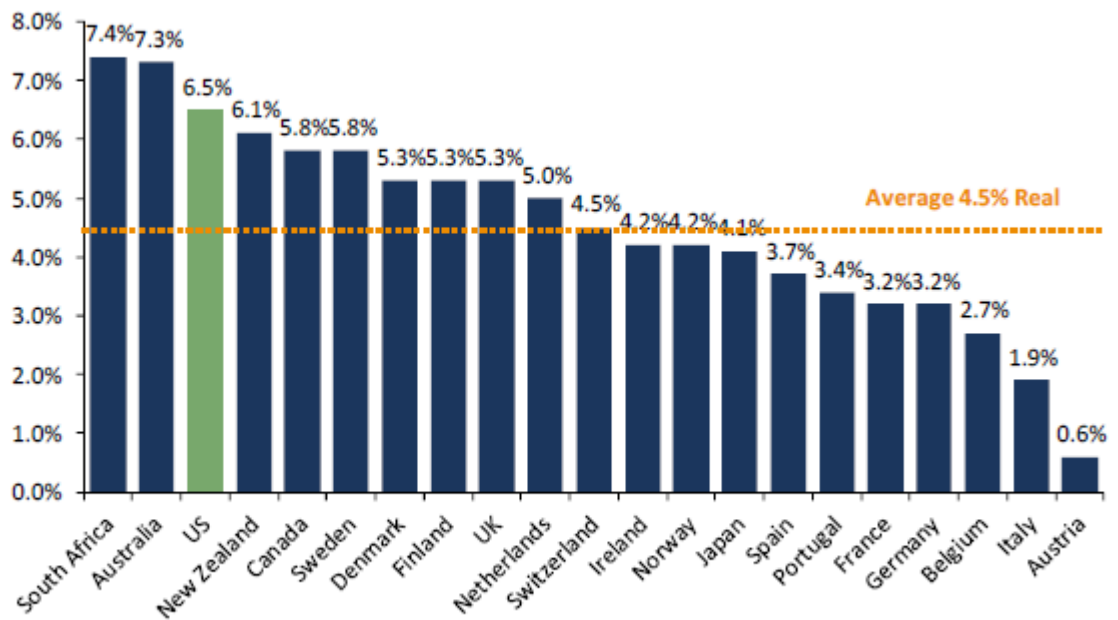
- GDP growth in the US will disappoint in 2016 given the global weakness. Industrial production data along with retail sales and consumer spending was recessionary for much of 2015. While there have been pockets of strength such as autos, we see this peaking entering 2016. While Janet Yellen raised the Federal Funds rate by 25 basis points in December, future rate hikes are questionable given economic data is likely to remain weak. At worst, we foresee a couple of additional hikes and a flattening yield curve. In our view, the 10-year Treasury is as likely to touch 1% as it is 3%. We see continued strong demand for US fixed income assets both domestically and globally as dollar strength continues for an extended period of time.
- We believe US equity markets are ripe for a fall in 2016. Valuations remain elevated in the face of no revenue or earnings growth. Another factor at play will be profit margins (unsustainably high), which will likely suffer from increasing labor rates (including higher minimum wage rates) further pressuring earnings. Over the long term we think it is likely that valuations will begin to compress and stocks will begin to lose their long term appeal as both baby boomers and institutional investors continue to pursue yield and capital preservation strategies.

US Financial Markets: Fundamentals, Demographics and the Future of Investing

As discussed above, we see continued strength of the US dollar through 2016. However, this is not because we see the US economy performing exceptionally well; rather, just less poorly than most. The US dollar and bond markets will continue to benefit from a flight to quality trade keeping rates much lower than expected by many. We also see the beginning of the end of the bull market in stocks which began in 2009. Importantly, we see a very negative long term trend for equities in general over the next decade.

Let's begin with a look at some important historical data. Stock returns over the long-term have averaged about 6.5% for US investors. I believe that most investors would be very surprised at this number. This takes into account the last 115 years.¹

Exhibit 9: Real Stock Market Return Since 1900



Source: Dimson, Marsh, and Staunton, Triumph of the Optimists

I found the following table from Grantham Mayo Van Otterloo interesting. Note that the past ten and 20 year numbers are in line or slightly below the long term averages. However, the past five years have shown a return significantly in excess of this historical average for the U.S.²

¹ Inker, Ben, "Just How Bad Is Emerging, and How Good is the U.S.?", GMO Quarterly Letter, Q3 2015, p. 9. Copyright GMO.

² Inker, Ben, "Just How Bad Is Emerging, and How Good is the U.S.?", GMO Quarterly Letter, Q3 2015, p. 10. Copyright GMO.

Another observation that is important for our Canadian investors. The past five and ten year periods encompass the highest average oil prices in history, yet equity investors have made almost no money investing in the Canadian stock market. Is it any wonder that the best Canadian institutional investors have but token allocations to Canadian stocks and are instead turning to the US and other markets?

Table 3: Stock Market Performance

20 Years		10 Years		5 Years	
Denmark	12.3%	Denmark	11.0%	Ireland	19.1%
Sweden	10.2%	South Africa	7.6%	Denmark	16.5%
Spain	8.4%	Sweden	6.8%	Belgium	13.1%
Finland	8.0%	Netherlands	5.0%	Japan	12.1%
South Africa	7.7%	US	5.0%	US	11.5%
Switzerland	7.7%	Germany	4.9%	Switzerland	9.7%
Canada	7.3%	Switzerland	4.7%	New Zealand	9.6%
France	7.1%	Canada	3.2%	Netherlands	8.9%
Norway	7.0%	Australia	2.8%	Sweden	8.5%
Germany	7.0%	France	2.5%	Germany	8.3%
Netherlands	6.7%	Norway	2.3%	South Africa	7.8%
Australia	6.5%	UK	2.1%	France	6.8%
US	6.3%	Finland	1.7%	Finland	6.1%
Belgium	6.3%	Spain	1.6%	Norway	4.2%
UK	4.5%	Japan	1.5%	Australia	4.0%
Italy	3.6%	Belgium	1.5%	UK	3.0%
New Zealand	3.3%	New Zealand	1.2%	Italy	2.6%
Japan	2.0%	Italy	-2.8%	Canada	2.6%
Portugal	1.8%	Portugal	-4.6%	Spain	1.7%
Austria	1.7%	Ireland	-4.8%	Austria	-4.7%
Ireland	0.7%	Austria	-8.3%	Portugal	-8.6%

We believe regression to the mean is law in investing. Turing back to US equity markets, on the back of the outperformance for the past five years, we believe that returns over the next few years are likely to be well below historical averages of 6.5%. A brief look at beginning valuations tells us why we believe this to be the case.³

Shiller P/E Ratio



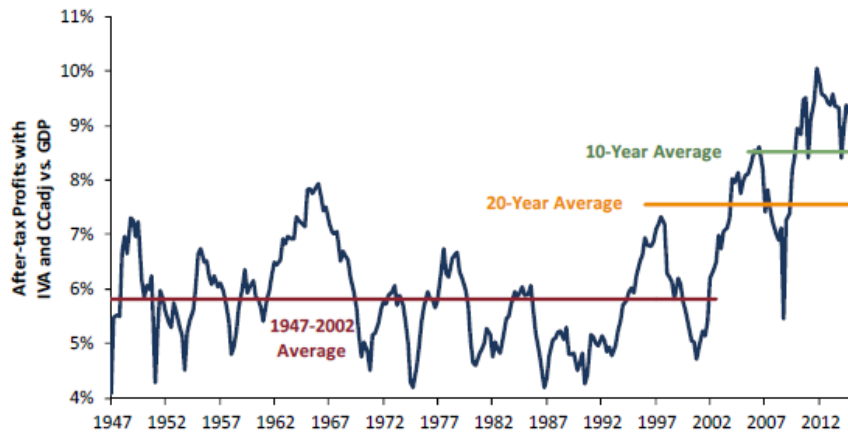
We are now at valuation levels seen only twice before: once before the Great Depression in 1930 and the second spiking in 2000 after the internet bubble and then remaining elevated from there leading up to the financial crisis of 2008. While valuations are key, we all understand that things can continue to be over-valued or become more over-valued for long periods of time, but at some

³ Source: Data sourced from <http://www.multpl.com/shiller-pe/>, as of March 7, 2016.

point, markets will wake up to the reality, and often over-correct. As we sit today, we believe that holding equities is not investing, but speculation. What is well known by investors today is that both revenue and earnings growth is now effectively non-existent. So much of the equity returns we have seen over this period have been nothing but increasing valuations based on money flow algorithms, which in turn were triggered by very low interest rates. Interestingly, the valuation explosion has happened at a time when corporate profits as a percent of GDP have been at their all-time high.⁴

Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

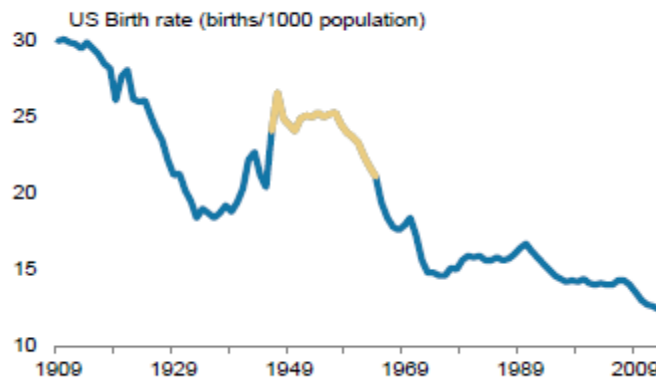
Exhibit 14: U.S. Corporate Profits as Percent of GDP



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

We have had a long run of productivity (jobs being replaced by machines or outsourced to low wage jurisdictions/countries) and had a huge dividend from lower interest rates (debt being refinanced at lower rates) but all good things come to an end. We concur with recent research from Morgan Stanley that suggests labor will begin to take a larger share of the cost pie, hurting profitability going forward. Labor forces are shrinking across the globe as population growth in both developed and key emerging economies slows. Nowhere is this more evident than here in the U.S.⁵

Baby Boom versus Baby Bust in US



Source: National Centre for Health Statistics USA, Morgan Stanley Research

With unemployment rates falling below 5%, it is a matter of time before wage pressures begin to build. And with the economy firmly pointed in the direction of services (i.e. healthcare), the ability to do more with less reaches its

⁴ Inker, Ben, “Just How Bad Is Emerging, and How Good is the U.S.?”, GMO Quarterly Letter, Q3 2015, p. 15. Copyright GMO.

⁵ Goodhart, Charles, Manoj Pradhan, and Pratyancha Pardeshi, “Could Demographics Reverse Three Multi-Decade Trends?”, Morgan Stanley Research, September 15, 2015, p. 24.

limits. In summary, in the face of sky high valuations, we believe a lack of revenue growth and shrinking profit margins will all play a role on limiting future equity returns.

While all of these fundamental factors are causes for concern, they are dwarfed by the real issue of future money flows. We are in the midst of a global shift in demographics as the Baby Boom generation ages and faces retirement causing a need for reduced volatility in their investments. **We have seen it reported that approximately 75% of global equity markets are owned by pension plans and retail investors, both of which are likely to dramatically reduce stock exposure going forward.**

Of this, pensions (which we have seen reported account for about 45% of global equities alone) are expected to increasingly focus on portfolio immunization, whereby they look to match the maturity of their assets and liabilities, which forces these plans to turn to credit versus equity.

On the retail side, as we have previously discussed in our piece “[Of Elephant and Rates](#),” which was written two years ago, at the time, estimates were that nearly 75% of global retail assets would be owned either by those retired or near retirement within five years.⁶ This is a huge number, and as people in this demographic enter or near the retirement phase, they tend to focus on capital preservation and income generation, which we expect will cause investors to rotate out of equities into credit.

We believe that demographics are destiny. As the population ages, they will no longer be focused on taking on risk to generate higher returns via equity markets, but rather turning to the income and lower volatility provided by fixed income. While we expect this to prevent interest rates from significantly increasing as the demand for fixed income increases in the years and decades to come, we also expect it will result in less demand (or outright liquidations) and lower valuations for equities.

So be it this demographic shift, the lack of revenue/demand growth globally, or our expectation that profit margins have peaked, we believe that there will be little to drive further equity market valuation and price expansion over the next year and beyond.

Basel, Volcker, Oil and the Future of Credit Markets

So while we wouldn't want to own equities as we enter 2016, let's spend some time on what we do want to own—US corporate credit. Given that we are a credit manager this is not a surprise. We aren't simply just talking our own book; rather, we see the three following events as providing investors with one of the most compelling entry points we have seen in our careers:

- **Basel II+III**—The banking provisions that increased capital and liquidity requirements to hold credit rated BB and lower.
- **Volcker Provision**—The law inside Dodd-Frank that eliminated proprietary trading, which by its nebulous design has all but eliminated dealer market making.

⁶ See our piece “Of Elephants and Rates,” <http://www.peritusasset.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Of-Elephants-and-Rates-Final1.pdf>, January 2014, p. 4-5.

- **Oil Prices**—Oil and gas represents approximately 12% of the high yield bond market⁷, depending on the index, and the price collapse has caused not only oil and gas bonds to crash but has caused contagion through the credit markets.

The Basel Accords govern banks and their behavior. What has happened is that they have continued to increase the costs for banks to hold non-investment grade credits on their balance sheet, initially here with the Basel II provisions.⁸

6. **Claims on corporates**

66. The table provided below illustrates the risk weighting of rated corporate claims, including claims on insurance companies. The standard risk weight for unrated claims on corporates will be 100%. No claim on an unrated corporate may be given a risk weight preferential to that assigned to its sovereign of incorporation.

Credit assessment	AAA to AA-	A+ to A-	BBB+ to BB-	Below BB-	Unrated
Risk weight	20%	50%	100%	150%	100%

To translate, if 8% was the base capital charge, then AAA to AA securities would require only 20% of this, or 1.6% capital backing for each dollar of securities held. Anything below BB- would require 150% of 8%, or 12% capital, meaning it requires significantly more capital for banks to own non-investment grade debt. We've seen it reported that upwards of 50% of the global corporate bond market is now rated BB or below, so these requirements do have an impact. While the banks have historically been a natural buyer, following this, they have limited their involvement in the high yield market because of the costs to hold such credits reduced their ROEs and ROAs.

Not to be outdone, US regulators have now fully implemented the Volcker Provision inside the massive Dodd-Frank legislation:⁹

The Bank Holding Company Act of 1956 (12 U.S.C. 1841 et seq.) is amended by adding at the end the following:

“SEC. 13. PROHIBITIONS ON PROPRIETARY TRADING AND CERTAIN RELATIONSHIPS WITH HEDGE FUNDS AND PRIVATE EQUITY FUNDS.

“(a) IN GENERAL.—

“(1) PROHIBITION.—Unless otherwise provided in this section, a banking entity shall not—

“(A) engage in proprietary trading; or

Engaging in proprietary trading is the key phrase. When a dealer executes trades for clients they historically have purchased the bonds or loans and then re-sell them. Sometimes they hold the securities for days or weeks and other times for mere seconds before selling them to the client. Under the new legislation, it is now close to impossible for the banks to separate proprietary

⁷ Acciavatti, Peter, Tony Linares, Nelson Jantzen, CFA, Rahul Sharma, and Chuanxin Li. “Credit Strategy Weekly Update,” J.P. Morgan North American High Yield and Leveraged Loan Research, March 4, 2016, p. 38.

⁸ “International Convergence of Capital Measurement and Capital Standards,” Basel Committee on Banking Supervision. Bank for International Settlements June 2006.

⁹ H.R. 4173, from the one hundred eleventh Congress of the United States of America, January 5, 2010. From the Library of Congress.

trading from market making activity. As a result, banks now hold very limited inventories and are much less involved in making markets than they once were.¹⁰

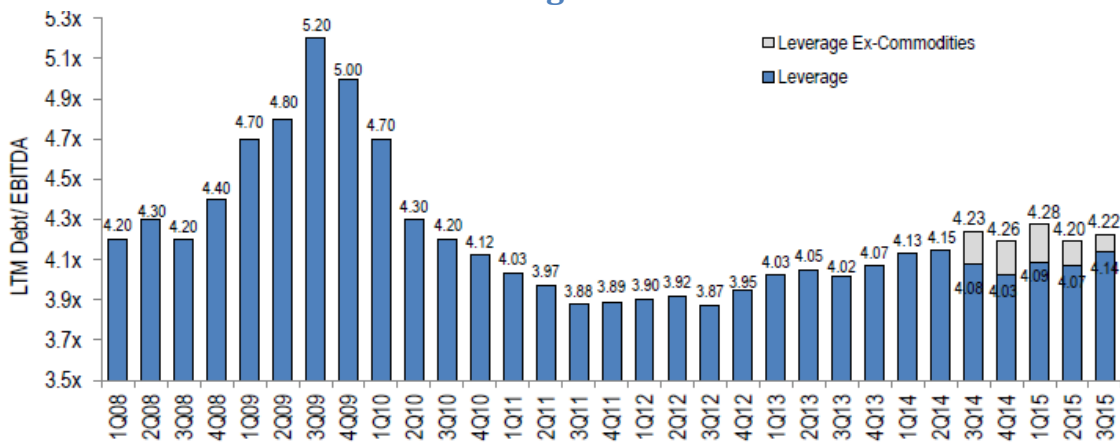
Dealer Inventories as a Percentage of the HY Market



Source: BofA Merrill Lynch Global Research, NY Federal Reserve

This means liquidity has been significantly curtailed and markets are dysfunctional in many cases. Let’s call this the law of unintended consequences. For decades banks were there to broker trades between buyers and sellers and using their capital to bridge these two, creating liquidity in the market and helping keep volatility at bay much of the time. Now that this bank capital is not there you are seeing much wider bid/offer spreads, as buyers put in very low bids when they know there is someone that needs to sell, or vice versa when buying activity is strong, thus creating larger pricing gaps both up and down in bond/loan prices. These dynamics have resulted in increased volatility within the high yield market and, currently, we believe this has caused prices to fall well below the fundamental value for many credits. Two statistics are key in understanding what fundamentals we are referencing. First is the total leverage of companies and the second is interest coverage.¹¹

Leverage Ratios

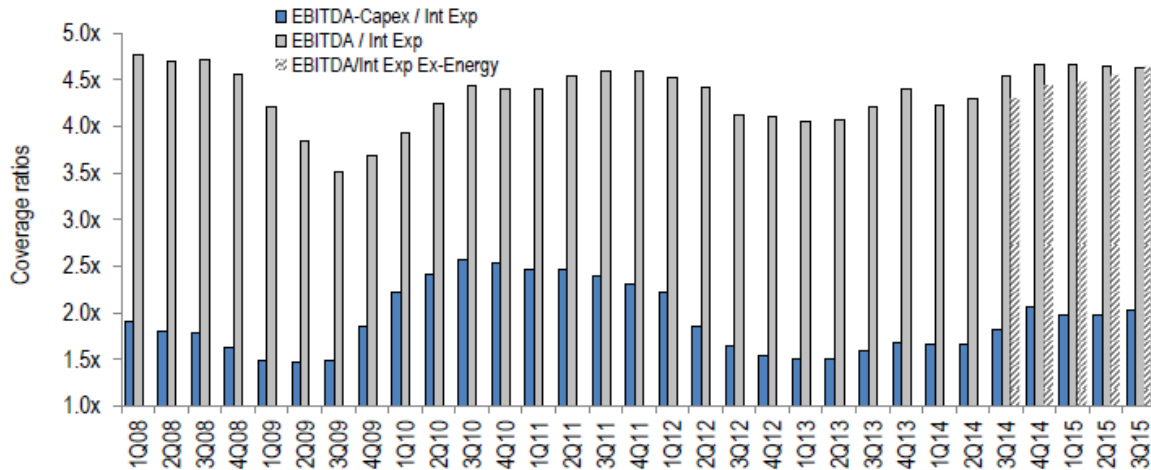


Sources: J.P. Morgan; Capital IQ.

¹⁰ Flanagan, Chris, Hans Mikkelsen, Shyam S. Rajan, “The US Fixed Income Weekly: 2016 Fixed Income Outlook,” Bank of America Merrill Lynch, December 7, 2015, p. 264.

¹¹ Acciavatti, Peter, Tony Linares, Nelson R. Jantzen, CFA, Rahul Sharma, and Chuanxin Li. “2015 High Yield Annual Review,” J.P. Morgan North American High Yield Research, December 30, 2015, p. 152,154. Leverage ratio is the company’s debt divided by earnings before interest taxes depreciation amortization (EBITDA). Coverage ratio is EBITDA divided by the company’s interest expense.

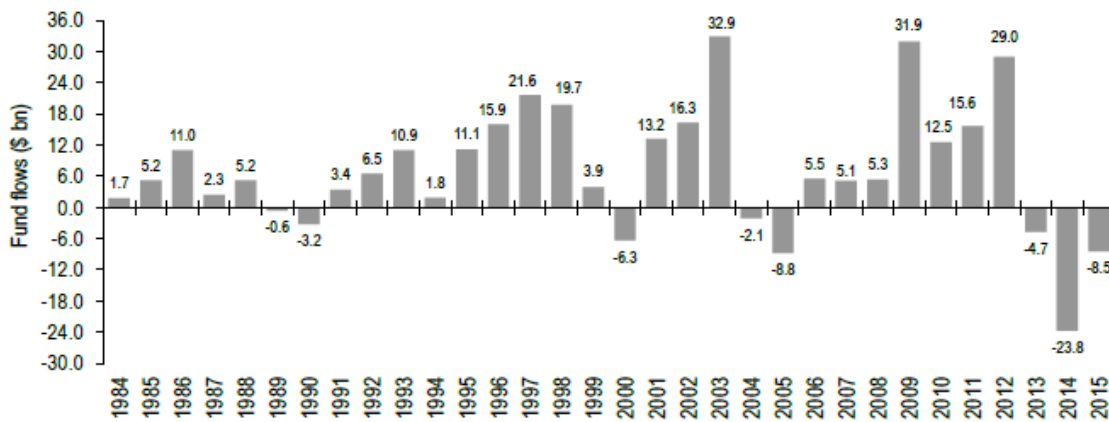
Coverage Ratios Remain Healthy



Sources: J.P. Morgan; CapitalIQ.

While it would be a normal occurrence to see companies re-lever themselves after six years into a cycle, we have seen little of this type of bad behavior with total leverage metrics near historic lows. Interest coverage has also remained on the high side (meaning more cash flow to service debt) as companies have been able to refinance at lower rates. So while we have ongoing diatribes about Armageddon from Jeff Gundlach and Carl Icahn, we believe they are silly and unsupported outside of oil and gas. Note the following funds flow chart which shows significant outflows from high yield bond mutual funds over the past three years.¹² This hardly supports the notion of an overbought or popular asset class, as many of the pundits have seemed to claim.

Annual HY Mutual Fund Flows (Lipper)

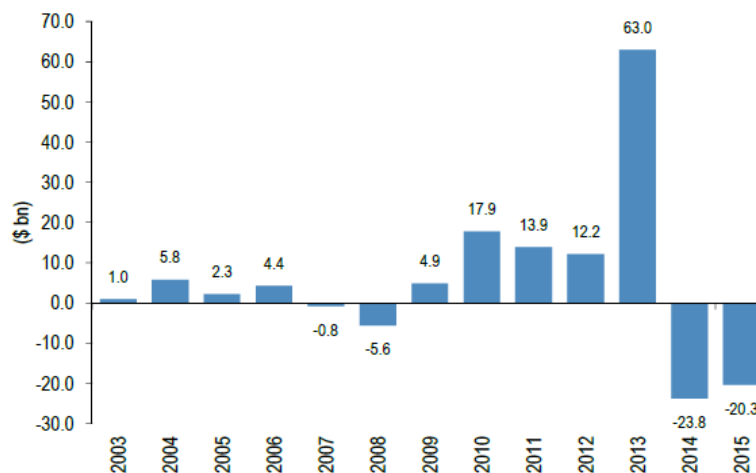


Note: Includes weekly and monthly reporting funds. 2015 flows are through December 9, 2015.

¹² Acciavatti, Peter, Tony Linares, Nelson R. Jantzen, CFA, Rahul Sharma, and Chuanxin Li. "2015 High Yield Annual Review," J.P. Morgan North American High Yield Research, December 30, 2015, p. 127.

The loan market is no different. The basic difference between loans and bonds is that loans are floating rate, while bonds have fixed rate coupons. After a massive inflow in 2013 (based on taper tantrums and the notion that interest rates were going significantly higher), the last two years have seen very significant outflows.¹³ This has caused much of the loan market to trade at a hefty discount to par, thus giving investors the opportunity for potential capital appreciation in addition to the coupon interest.

Leveraged loan mutual fund flows



Source: J.P. Morgan; Lipper FMI

Broader loan market activity and issuance relies significantly on collateralized loan obligation (CLO) issuance. Thus, the loan market has been further pressured by proposed “risk-retention” rules that require CLO managers to own 5% of the total value of their structures. Only a handful of large managers have the ability to do so today.

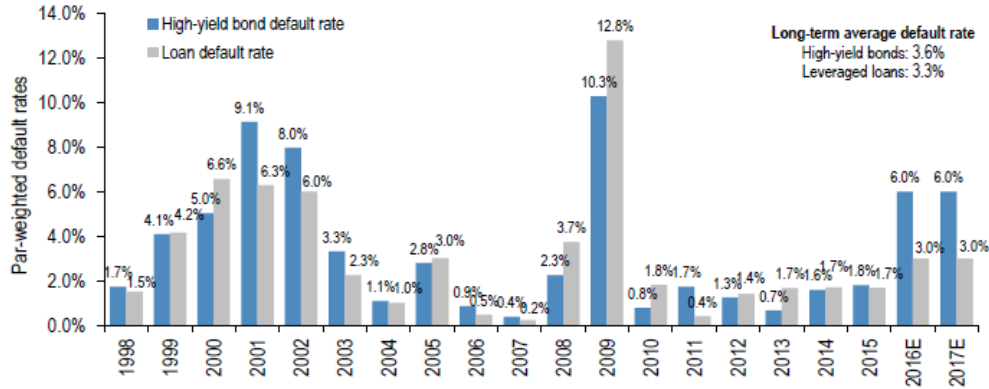
So legislatively and technically the markets for loans and bonds are broken. Yet we believe this has created a very compelling opportunity for investment as the recent price decline and spread expansion we have seen in the high yield market is largely driven by these technical factors not fundamental weakness.

But what about the “risk” and how are we going to define “risk.” For credit investors the primary risk is default. While interest rates play a role in all asset classes, they historically have a very limited effect on a portfolio of high yield loans and bonds given the yields these securities offer and their low duration relative to other fixed income asset classes, such as investment grade and municipal bonds. So that leaves default as the primary risk. Defaults are going to rise off a very low base, but this is primarily due to expectations for double digit defaults in the energy and metals and mining sectors, while defaults in the rest of the high yield market are expected to be around 2-3%, which remains below long-term historical averages.¹⁴

¹³ Acciavatti, Peter, Tony Linares, Nelson R. Jantzen, CFA, Rahul Sharma, and Chuanxin Li. “Leveraged Loan Market Monitor,” J.P. Morgan North American High Yield Research, January 4, 2016, p. 20.

¹⁴ Acciavatti, Peter, Tony Linares, Nelson R. Jantzen, CFA, Rahul Sharma, and Chuanxin Li. “Default Monitor,” J.P. Morgan North American High Yield Research, March 1, 2016, p. 5.

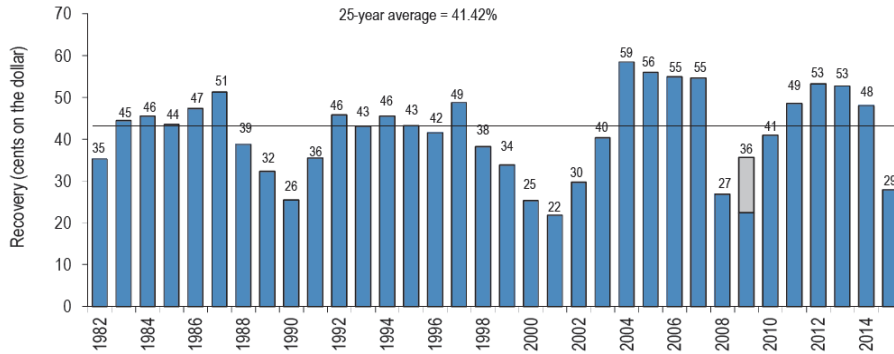
High-yield bond and leveraged loan default forecast



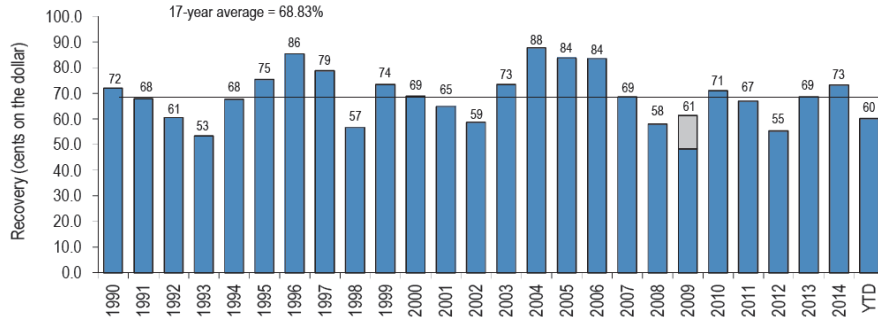
Note: 2014 default rates exclude TXU's \$36.1bn default
Source: J.P. Morgan.

But what is important for fixed income investors is that defaults are only part of the equation. Unlike stocks, bond and loan holders often recover a significant portion of their money as they work through the restructuring process. In fact, depending upon where one purchased the bonds or loans, a default could potentially even result in a gain. Historical default recoveries are provided for both bonds and first lien loans below.¹⁵

High Yield Bond Average Recoveries



1st Lien Leveraged Loan Average Recoveries



Note: Recovery rates exclude second-lien loans.

¹⁵ Acciavatti, Peter, Tony Linares, Nelson R. Jantzen, CFA, Rahul Sharma, and Chuanxin Li. "2015 High Yield Annual Review," J.P. Morgan North American High Yield Research, December 30, 2015, p. 16.

So in summary, loans have on average recovered 69 cents on the dollar in a default, while bonds have recovered around 41 cents on the dollar. If you use J.P. Morgan's expected default rates of 6% and 3% (bonds/loans), you would have a theoretical loss rate of 3.5% for bonds and 0.9% for first lien loans using these historical average recoveries. Therefore a combined portfolio (50/50 bonds and loans) would have a theoretical loss rate of 2.2%. If you had a beginning yield of 8.5% (what we would see as a rational number in today's market), you would have a net or risk adjusted theoretical return expectation of 6.3% before any fees.¹⁶

But the news gets a great deal better. Again, that default rate number is the expectation for the market as a whole, which includes metals, mining and oil and gas. As we noted above, the bulk of defaults will be concentrated in these industries. So a thoughtful investor can lessen their default risk by avoiding many of these industries. Just as important, investors in bonds and loans have a number of ways to generate potential capital gains, and potentially lower loss rates, by buying these securities at significant discounts to par (\$100), and these discounts are readily available in today's high yield market.

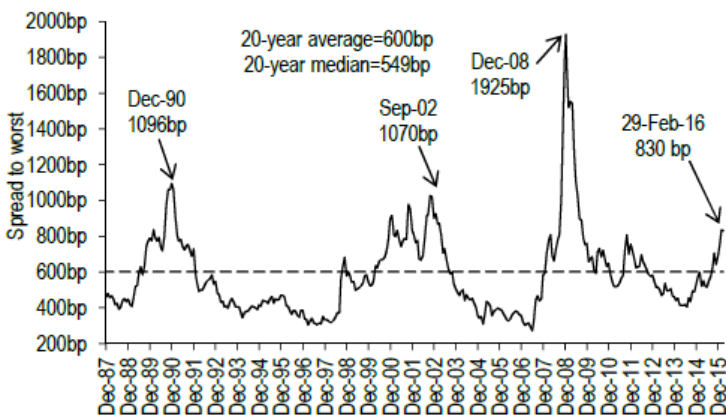
The great thing about fixed income investing is the outcomes are relatively finite. They include the following:

1. Maturity: All bonds and loans have a maturity date requiring the company to pay back principal to investors on this date.
2. Call: Bonds often have a call feature, allowing the company to refinance or otherwise pay back the bonds prior to maturity. The investor is required to give up the bonds subject to a predetermined call price, which can include call premiums above the par maturity. Typically, this will start in year four or five of a bond's life.
3. Poison Put: This is formally known as a change of control covenant. Many high yield bonds and loans have this covenant by which if the company is acquired (change of control), the bond or loan holder has the right to "put" the securities back to the company, forcing them to repurchase the bonds typically at a price of \$101.
4. Tender: At any time a company can launch a tender offer for their securities. However, in this case, unlike the call schedule which is contractual, the holder is not required to sell unless they like the tender price and want to sell their bonds back to the company.
5. Default: This can be technical in nature (tripping a covenant) or it can be fundamental, where the interest or principal payment is not met at the scheduled time or within the grace period. Interest stops accruing at that point and the company can work out a restructuring plan in or out of bankruptcy court.

So if an investor is buying their securities at discounts to par, four of the five of these events may generate capital gains in addition to the interest income the investor is receiving. The main differences between debt investing and dividend-based investing in equities are the contractual nature of the cash flows (dividends are not legal contracts but set by the Board quarterly, while bond interest is a contractual obligation) and the built in exit strategy (via maturity in fixed income securities).

¹⁶ This scenario is provided for informational purposes only, actual results may be material different depending on actual default rates, recovery rates, fees, and bond and loan pricing and yield, among other factors.

Spread to worst



Source: J.P.Morgan

feeling some pain, while we are starting to see some stabilization in high yield and believe this market has much more room to run given the solid fundamentals outside of energy and commodities.

Summary and Conclusion

While we continue to see attractive value for investors in the high yield bond and loan markets, it is important to recognize that these markets have changed. Legislation enacted over the past several years has largely removed a significant player (commercial banks) from the market. On top of that, the SEC has turned the focus toward addressing the “liquidity” issues that this legislation, and the reduced market making activity that has gone with it, has created. The exact form that the SEC’s actions will take is yet to be determined.

Rather than wait and play defense, we have decided to get out ahead of these issues. Managing high yield bonds and loans inside an ETF format requires finesse and a definitive process to deal with two specific issues: liquidity and volatility. Historically, we have maximized yield relative to the risk assumed. While this is still very much a part of our investment process, we have overlaid this credit selection methodology with a much more definitive portfolio management process. With this, we are now taking a three pronged approach to managing our portfolio. The first is our recently implemented practice to strategically focus a portion of the portfolio on primary (new issue) transactions. Our experience has been that new deals are well supported by their underwriters and tend to be very liquid in the months following issuance, and the companies are well vetted upon issuing new securities, thus generally providing this section of the portfolio with significant liquidity and dampened volatility. We continue to be selective here as we focus on companies within industries we like and feel will do well going forward.

The second is the floating rate loan allocation within our portfolio. The focus here going forward will be on first lien loans, which generally provides a higher quality component to the portfolio and lowers volatility, all the while continuing to reduce duration given the floating rate nature of loans.

While equities are faced with elevated valuations, which we believe are likely to fall given the dynamics ahead, we see value in today’s high yield market. Spreads (the yield to worst advantage relative to comparable maturity treasuries) here are well above their historical average.¹⁷

High yield was first to experience a decline, while it took months for equities to start to catch up. Equities are just beginning to

¹⁷ Acciavatti, Peter, Tony Linares, Nelson R. Jantzen, CFA, Rahul Sharma, and Chuanxin Li. “High Yield Market Monitor,” J.P. Morgan North American High Yield Research, March 1, 2016, p. 14.

Finally, our portfolio will remain consistent with our traditional fundamentally driven, deep value approach to the credit markets. While as active managers we are always monitoring our holdings and evaluating our upside versus downside, we now are including an additional risk overlay that involves specifically re-evaluating our holdings once a \$70 price is breached. Due to some of the regulatory changes reference above, we believe that \$70 is the price point where bonds begin to be viewed as “stressed.” Through our experience we have seen many securities gap down well below this price once it breached the \$70 level, thus we believe re-evaluating at this point and potentially selling depending on our analysis may help reduce the volatility in our returns. We will be highly sensitive to this level going forward. Finally, it is our intention to keep the portfolio broadly diversified across various industries to further dampen volatility. We believe these efforts position us and investors well to take advantage of the yield offered by the high yield debt market, while operating within the current market challenges.

In looking at financial markets, demographics are truly destiny and they have arrived. This is no longer a future discussion but one that is now exerting its influence. Today we observe negative interest rates in many parts of the world. In fact, Japan just issued a 10 year bond with a negative yield. Monetary policy is of little effect against this backdrop. Rates are low and may go lower but the demand for money will continue to remain muted. Final demand for many goods and services will continue to fall as the globe ages. Importantly, demand for stocks by both institutional and individual investors looks to be rolling over. With limited global growth and poor technicals, we believe it is likely we are beginning a secular trend that will compress equity valuations. As demand moves from equities, we expect it to transfer to credit in this zero sum game.

Within this framework, we believe the high yield market offers investors an attractive alternative to equities and provides investors with the potential for higher yields/income than is available in various other fixed income options. Outside of energy and commodities, we view the high yield debt market as undervalued given the fundamental backdrop relative to the yield and price discounts current available. This market offers income focused investors a way to generate a steady income stream and the potential for capital appreciation to help drive long-term returns.

Sincerely,

PERITUS ASSET MANAGEMENT, LLC

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