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Clear Direction in a Complex World

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Quarterly Insights – October 2019

Markets in the third quarter of 2019 looked surprisingly similar to the second quarter as more U.S.-China trade war uncertainty and a lack of clarity by the Federal Reserve on future interest rate policy caused a sharp increase in volatility in the middle of the quarter, but the S&P 500 remained resilient and ultimately recouped those losses to finish the quarter not far from the new all-time highs established in late July.

The third quarter started strong as news of a "trade truce" between the U.S. and China, which was announced at the G20 meeting in late June, combined with better-than-expected second-quarter corporate earnings to propel the S&P 500 to new all-time highs in July. Also helping markets rally was anticipation of the first interest rate cut by the Federal Reserve since 2008, which became reality on July 31st when the FOMC cut the Fed Funds Rate by 25 basis points.

But that strong start to the quarter was quickly undone in early August thanks to increased tariffs between the U.S. and China (the trade truce was short-lived), uncertainty over future Fed policy, and concerning signals from the bond market regarding economic growth and inflation.

The U.S.-China trade truce that was agreed to in late June didn't last much more than a month as President Trump announced new 10% tariffs on $300 billion worth of Chinese imports on August 1st, citing a failure by the Chinese to fulfill promises to increase purchases of U.S. agricultural products. Then, in late August, China retaliated by levying various new tariffs on $75 billion worth of U.S. imports, and President Trump immediately responded by increasing existing tariffs on all $550 billion of Chinese imports. The tariff tit-for-tat weighed on markets throughout August.

Also pressuring stocks in August was uncertainty regarding U.S. monetary policy. As mentioned, the Fed cut interest rates by 25 basis points on July 31st, but they did not definitively signal more rate cuts were coming, and disappointment from that lack of clear guidance, combined with growing worries over future economic growth, added to the volatility in August.

Finally, a closely watched part of the U.S. Treasury yield curve, the "10s-2s spread," inverted (meaning that yields on shorter-term notes exceeded those of longer-term notes) for the first time since 2007.

This signal has historically preceded a recession by an average of 18 months, although admittedly, it's not a perfect indicator. Regardless, seeing this signal for the first time in over a decade led to a deterioration in investor sentiment and added to the August volatility.

Despite this trifecta of headwinds, markets again showed impressive resilience in the final month of the quarter, just as they did in the second quarter of 2019.

Early in September, there was improvement in U.S.-China trade relations as President Trump authorized a short delay on the implementation of some of the recently announced tariff increases, and both the U.S. and China agreed to face-to-face meetings in October in another attempt to end the now 18-plus-month trade war.

Additionally, the Federal Reserve cut interest rates for a second time on September 18th and clearly signaled more willingness for future cuts if conditions warranted further action.

Finally, after a brief period of being inverted, the yield curve normalized in early September in part due to better-than-expected U.S. economic data and subsequently easing concerns of a future recession.

Due to the improving market fundamentals listed above, the S&P 500 rebounded solidly in September and came close to matching July's all-time highs, although the initiation of an impeachment investigation by the House of Representatives on President Trump caused a modest pullback late in the month.

In sum, the volatility we witnessed in the third quarter, which remains historically typical, was not surprising due to the numerous macroeconomic uncertainties facing this market and the economy.

But the third quarter was also a reminder that volatility does not automatically mean poor performance. Resilient corporate earnings, stable U.S. economic growth and an accommodative Federal Reserve combined with rising optimism towards U.S.-China trade to offset the volatility and deliver another quarter of positive returns.

Third-Quarter Performance Review – Defensive Sectors Outperform

Major index returns were somewhat mixed in the third quarter as three of the four major indices, the S&P 500, Nasdaq 100 and Dow Jones Industrial Average, finished the quarter with positive returns, while the Russell 2000 saw negative returns. That mixed performance largely reflected the deterioration in U.S.-China trade relations and rising concerns about global economic growth.

On a sector level, eight of the 11 S&P 500 Index sectors finished the third quarter with positive returns. But in a departure from the first two quarters of 2019, traditional defensive stock sectors with high dividend yields (like utilities and REITS) handily outperformed. Falling Treasury yields and concerns about future economic growth fueled the outperformance of these higher-yielding sectors.

Corporate bonds saw solidly positive returns in the third quarter, although investment-grade bonds handily outperformed high-yield bonds, and that move to higher-quality corporate debt also underscored concerns about future economic growth and corporate earnings.

Fourth-Quarter Market Outlook

Once again, the S&P 500 successfully weathered an increase in volatility this past quarter, as positive current economic fundamentals, interest rate cuts, better-than-expected corporate earnings and renewed hope for resolution on U.S.-China trade helped the S&P 500 maintain strong year-to-date gains.

However, the increase in volatility we saw in May, and again most recently in August, is an important reminder that while markets remain broadly resilient, risks to investment portfolios and the economy need to be carefully monitored. There are still multiple unknowns currently facing investors as we begin the final three months of 2019.

First, the ongoing U.S.-China trade war is clearly the most important influence on the markets. And while there has been rising optimism for some sort of temporary resolution, the fact remains that the U.S. and China still have substantial tariffs in place on imports, with more potentially coming in December. Those tariffs continue to be a headwind on global economic growth, and slowing global growth is a risk to markets that we will continue to watch closely.

Turning to the economy, the outlook remains uncertain. Currently, U.S. economic growth is solid and the envy of the world's developed economies. And, accommodative policy by the Federal Reserve will continue to support that growth. However, Fed rate cuts don't bring guarantees of sustained periods of economic growth, and the ongoing U.S.-China trade war paired with the reappearance of some concerning indicators, such as an inverted yield curve, mean we must remain vigilant in detecting any potential future economic slowdown.

Finally, both domestic and geopolitical dramas require close watching over the coming months. Domestically, the impeachment inquiry of President Trump has the potential to weigh on investor sentiment, while internationally U.S.-Iran tensions are as high as they've been in years, and any conflict between the U.S. and Iran will almost certainly be a negative for stocks, broadly speaking.

Bottom line, U.S. markets were resilient in the third quarter and the performance of most markets year to date remains impressive. However, our experience has taught us that while markets may be resilient, risks still need to be monitored closely, and so we will continue to do so as we have all year.

What happens next with the U.S.-China trade war (will there be a trade truce?), Federal Reserve policy (will the Fed cut rates again in 2019?), and future economic growth (does the yield curve invert again?) will likely determine whether markets maintain, and potentially add to, year-to-date gains—or whether we see similar bouts of volatility like we did in May and August of this year.

We understand that markets always face uncertainties at the start of a new quarter, and we are committed to monitoring these situations and their impact on the markets and your portfolio. Positively, current corporate and economic fundamentals remain solid, and it is those factors that determine the longer-term path of markets, not the latest political drama or salvo in the U.S.-China trade war.

At Zick Whitted Taub Investment Strategies, we understand that volatility, regardless of the cause, can be unnerving, even if it is historically typical. That's why we remain committed to helping you navigate this ever-changing market environment, with a focused eye on ensuring we continue to make progress on achieving your long-term investment goals.

Our years of experience in all types of markets (calm and volatile) have taught us that successful investing remains a marathon, not a sprint.

Therefore, it remains critical to stay invested, remain patient, and stick to a plan. That's why we've worked diligently with you to establish a personal allocation target based on your financial position, risk tolerance, and investment time horizon.

The strong market performance notwithstanding, we remain vigilant towards risks to portfolios and the economy, and we thank you for your ongoing confidence and trust. Rest assured that our entire team will remain dedicated to helping you successfully navigate this market environment.

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions, comments, or to schedule a portfolio review.

Sincerely,

Allen

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Inclusion of these indexes is for illustrative purposes only. Keep in mind that individuals cannot invest directly in any index, and index performance does not include transitions costs or other fees, which will affect actual investment performance. Individual investor's results will vary. Commodities' investing is generally considered speculative because of the significant potential for investment loss. Their markets are likely to be volatile and there may be sharp price fluctuation even during periods when prices overall are rising. There is an inverse relationship between interest rate movements and bond prices. Generally, when interest rates rise, bond prices fall and when interest rates fall, bond prices generally rise.

Barclays Aggregate Index is comprised of the Government/Corporate, the Mortgage-Backed Securities and the Asset-Backed Securities indices.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average (DJIA) is a price-weighted average of 30 significant stocks traded on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) and the NASDAQ

The NASDAQ Composite is a stock market index of the common stocks and similar securities listed on the NASDAQ stock market.

The Russell 2000 Index is a small-cap stock market index of the bottom 2,000 stocks in the Russell 3000 Index. The Russell 2000 index is an unmanaged index of small cap securities which generally involve greater risks.

MSCI EAFE (Europe, Australasia, and Far East) is a free float-adjusted market capitalization index that is designed to measure developed market equity performance, excluding the United States & Canada. The EAFE consists of the country indices of 21 developed nations.

MSCI Emerging Markets Index is designed to measure equity market performance in 23 emerging market countries. The index's three largest industries are materials, energy, and banks.

The MSCI ACWI (All Country World Index) Index is a free float-adjusted market capitalization weighted index that is designed to measure the equity market performance of developed and emerging markets. As of June 2007 the MSCI ACWI consisted of 48 country indices comprising 23 developed and 25 emerging market country indices. The developed market country indices included are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. The emerging market country indices included are: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Czech Republic, Egypt, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Israel, Jordan, Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Russia, South Africa, Taiwan, Thailand, and Turkey.

S&P GSCI Crude Oil is an index tracking changes in the spot price for crude oil.

The S&P MidCap 400® provides investors with a benchmark for mid-sized companies.

LBMA Gold Price refers to the London Bullion Market Association (LBMA) Gold Price.

S&P GSCI (Broad- Based Commodities) is a leading measure of general price movements and inflation in the world economy.

Barclays US Aggregate Bond Index is a broad-based flagship benchmark that measures the investment grade, US dollar-denominated, fixed-rate taxable bond market.

The Barclays Capital Municipal Bond is an unmanaged index of all investment grade municipal securities with at least 1 year to maturity.

The Bloomberg Barclays U.S. Corporate High Yield Bond Index is composed of fixed-rate, publicly issued, non-investment grade debt, is unmanaged, with dividends reinvested, and is not available for purchase. The index includes both corporate and non-corporate sectors. The corporate sectors are Industrial, Utility and Finance, which include both U.S. and non-U.S. corporations.

The Barclays Capital US Aggregate Index is an unmanaged market value weighted performance Benchmark for investment-grade fixed rate debt issues, including government, corporate, asset backed, and mortgage backed securities with a maturity of at least 1 year.

The **Bloomberg Barclays US Mortgage Backed Securities (MBS) Index** tracks agency mortgage backed pass-through securities (both fixed-rate and hybrid ARM) guaranteed by Ginnie Mae (GNMA), Fannie Mae (FNMA), and Freddie Mac (FHLMC). The index is constructed by grouping individual TBA-deliverable MBS pools into aggregates or generics based on program, coupon and vintage.

This material was prepared by Sevens Report for use by the associates of Zick Whitted Taub Investment Strategies.

Holding investments for the long term does not insure a profitable outcome. Investing involves risk and you may incur a profit or loss regardless of strategy selected, including diversification and asset allocation. Past performance is not indicative of future results.

Sector investments are companies engaged in business related to a specific sector. They are subject to fierce competition and their products and services may be subject to rapid obsolescence. There are additional risks associated with investing in an individual sector, including limited diversification. The companies engaged in the communications and technology industries are subject to fierce competition and their products and services may be subject to rapid obsolescence. Investing in oil involves special risks, including the potential adverse effects of state and federal regulation and may not be suitable for all investors. International investing involves special risks, including currency fluctuations, differing financial accounting standards, and possible political and economic volatility. Currencies investing are generally considered speculative because of the significant potential for investment loss. Their markets are likely to be volatile and there may be sharp price fluctuations even during periods when prices overall are rising. Gold is subject to the special risks associated with investing in precious metals, including but not limited to: price may be subject to wide fluctuation; the market is relatively limited; the sources are concentrated in countries that have the potential for instability; and the market is unregulated.

Be advised that investments in real estate and in REITs have various risks, including possible lack of liquidity and devaluation based on adverse economic and regulatory changes. Additionally, investments in REITs will fluctuate with the value of the underlying properties, and the price at redemption may be more or less than the original price paid. Real estate investments can be subject to different and greater risks than more diversified investments. Declines in the value of real estate, economic conditions, property taxes, tax laws and interest rates all present potential risks to real estate investments. Long-term Corporate Bonds are debt obligations of the issuing corporation. Bond prices and yields are subject to change based upon market conditions and availability. If bonds are sold prior to maturity, you may receive more or less than your initial investment.