

# Bedrock Friday 22 December 2017 Newsletter

It is Friday. This swansong Newsletter of 2017- And what a year it has been! We enter the holidays season with a smile as the world's economies appear to be firing on all their cylinders. Employment in the US is high, unemployment in Europe is abating, inflation is non-existent and interest rates are very low. We are feeling good about our environment and with this pleasing, cuddly and fuzzy feeling we embark on our predictions for 2018! We have charged the lithium-ion batteries of our Crystal ball, cleaned our spectacles, put on our thinking caps and peer into the future. As always, we like to start quoting Albert Einstein's "Making predictions is very difficult, especially about the future..." Our thoughts are driven by a central theme of a continuation of the concerted, synchronized global economic recovery, which in our view is on course to continue for some time yet, probably well beyond our subject 2018 horizon.

But before venturing into the predictive part, let us review the reality of 2017 vs. our expectations as expressed last year- We had been optimistic on the S&P500 expecting a 9% rise to about 2'500 and the DJIA was predicted to rise to about 22'000. Well, reality was rosier than our optimism- S&P at almost 2'700 and Dow at 24'800. We were directionally correct but were short on amplitude.

We had thought that inflation will reach the 2% target set by central banks. They all failed to reach this target except the Bank of England, as the UK inflation rose beyond 3% in the aftermath of the Brexit mess (the fall in the Sterling causing price levels to rise). The Federal Reserve embarked on a slow tightening process much as expected, resulting in a flattening of the US yield curve with little if any effect on the longer dated yields, which essentially remained steady, for Dollar debt. In Europe, the ECB slowed its QE but held rates at the short end, as did the Bank of Japan and the Swiss central bank. So fixed income holdings remained steady. We gave a cap for the US 10 year benchmark yield of 3.00% and we were correct, as the said Treasury Note yield at 2.48% today is within a whisker of where it closed 2016. We then predicted that the Hedge Fund industry will likely pursue its mediocre performances at a 5% clip and it produced so far 5.60% as measured by the HFRX index.

On oil we had expected a range of \$50 to \$60/Bbl and the price today is \$58 for a barrel of WTI. Steady as she goes... On currencies we had expected a strengthening of the Dollar based on interest rate spreads growing in its favour. We were right on the spreads, but the expected effect didn't occur. The DXY, the trade weighted Dollar index has fallen by 8.65% We had thought that parity with the Euro may be reached and it didn't. We worried the Yen will fall to 120 and it remained in a narrow band around 113. The Chinese currency which we had thought would weaken to 7 vs. the Dollar is actually stronger, holding around 6.6. Yes, we missed here. And we didn't even mention Bitcoin or other Cryptocurrencies.

We concluded our predictions with an expected return for a "balanced US\$ portfolio" to be at 6.60% with 50% equities, 40% bonds and 10% in alternatives. And the result was about 11% We hope you enjoyed our error (Do note that our actual "Balanced Mandates" had been and are allocated at 40% to equities). With this review of the past in mind, we invite you into our vision for next year...

We will start by saying that as of last Monday the DJIA has hit 70 new All Time High closes this year! This fact leads many to consider equities to be expensive. We disregard this subjective thought. We believe that the past few years have been truly extraordinary with a total repricing of assets in general and financial assets in particular. A paradigm change and we must adapt our thinking to the new reality- The biggest "players" in the financial markets are central banks and these players do not act along the basic rules of capitalism, i.e., targeting capital growth constrained by risk considerations. Central banks are not P&L (Profit and Loss) driven. These days, central bankers own portfolios of all kinds of bonds, corporate debt and even equities. With this in mind, when you read our forecasts, do not worry about the decimal points. 2018 will have broadly trend growth, some policy tightening and maybe slightly higher inflation. That is all investors need to know. Lets add some facts- The US passed a broad (if not optimal) Tax reform law. It will add P&L to many companies and may add cash to many individuals. This implies an increase in purchasing power for the public. It will give the US economy a further push forward, so you may expect GDP growth to accelerate. Then, we can expect the Trump administration to start pushing for infrastructure investment, yet another nudge to the growth. Yes, we are quite comfortable thinking of a 3.5-4% GDP growth for 2018.

The flip side of this economic growth is its funding. The US tax cuts will increase deficits as will eventual investments in infrastructure. Deficits are funded by debt. The Treasury will be increasing its borrowings, just as the Federal Reserve is to be unwinding its portfolio. Expect therefore a rise in supply of Treasuries, therefore a downwards pressure on bond prices, i.e., upwards pressures on yields. This being independent of the Fed moving the short rates further upwards. We expect to find US\$ rates to reach say 2% on the short end of the curve and 10 year Treasury Note to yield between 3 and 3.50% by year-end 2018.

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As the economy improves, credit spreads will likely hold at their current tight levels whilst overall yields may rise somewhat. We will be comfortable with a blended return of a fixed-income portfolio at about 5% for the year, some 300Bp over the targeted inflation level.

In Europe and Japan we expect no changes to policy nor to the bond markets. Yet the growth in States will help support both Japanese and European economic prospects and whilst likely to be slower than the US model, GDP growth could well accelerate to the 2% level. And China? Clearly slowing acceleration of growth, but about 6% for what now is a huge economy remain amazing! Looking good all around!

We will use the S&P 500 equity index as our proxy for global equities- Bloomberg tells us that the current earnings per share ("EPS") of the index are expected at \$142.76 for the past year. They also project the EPS to expand to \$147.94 for 2018. This prediction of theirs is quite inline with our GDP growth expectation- They grow earnings by 3.63% and we say GDP 3.5 to 4%. Then one can add some EPS growth from tax-cut effects. Wow, maybe we are conservative here? Let's allow this to be moderately amended upwards through the forward P/E ratio- let us be aggressive and set it at 20X.

So, with these base axioms fed to our Crystal ball, the S&P 500 can be expected to close 2018 at say 20X\$148 = 2'960, say 3'000 or some 12% up from today's 2'684. Extrapolating to the DJIA, why then, we find 27'700 as a fair target.

With these base indices predicted, we will further whet your appetites in suggesting that European and Japanese indices should do even better - We could allow for a higher EPS growth there and then allow for a higher increase in P/E given the lower interest rate environments. Looking good here too.

In short, we are comfortable in assigning a 12% return expectation for a global equity portfolio. We hold our 5% expected yield on our Fixed-income allocation and see no reason to change the Hedge Funds' guys targets- Rising from 5% to say 6% for next year.

Our Balanced-type portfolio should therefore yield about 8.60% [12%x50% equities, 5%x40% bonds, 6%x10% alternatives], a handsome increase over our expectations of a year ago.

We would like to complete our predictions with non-quantifiable views on commodities and currencies. We believe that as the economies gather steam, demand for fossil fuels with rise, wind and solar developments not withstanding. When Bedrock was established in 2004, the world consumed circa 80 million barrels of oil per day. Now, global warming in the forefront of much consideration, we consume 25% more, circa 100 million barrels per day. This progression will continue, and as production has become more flexible (on/off with shale-oil etc.) we believe its price will remain in the \$55-\$60 range. All other metals and mined commodities should experience modest upwards trends.

In the currency world, the Euro may find some politically driven headwinds and we would hold-back on buying as the effects of Spanish turmoil, Austrian right leaning governance and other localized issues are unpredictable. The Japanese currency should remain steady whilst the US Dollar appears undervalued- from a decline in 2017 against reason of interest rate differentials which will likely increase further. We wouldn't be surprised to find the DXY index rise some 10% by year-end '18.

*Now to our worries and concerns:*

- North Korea went to the second pages behind tax reform and proclamations about Jerusalem. We must not forget that crazy people with nothing to loose and nuclear weapons are a scary matter. We have no assurances that tomorrow's edition wont bring it back to headline status.
- Saudi Arabia and Iran. A long running conflict in the making with is smaller dependencies in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. This too could rise to headline status. Much oil flows across the Hormuz Straights and should they close...
- China is building military power to be commensurate with its ever rising economic influence. They have stepped beyond the Great Wall of China, which had been built to keep Chinese inside, not enemies out. It is a change in global power balance. Our cage could be rattled...
- The Federal Reserve has its own nuclear-equivalent device in its huge balance sheet. A false step, even a naughty word, could reshape much of the global financial balance. And they are not the only ones- ECB, BoJ, SnB, BoE...
- Volatility, our commonly used measure of risk is languishing at historical lows. This could change with a bang! As dangerous to stability as a Fed mistake...
- Let not forget Brexit. It isn't over by any means and we truly don't know what can be...
- Then to the "Bubble-du-Jour", Cryptocurrencies in general and Bitcoin in particular- Our view whereby the only true mining therein isn't computers churning algorithms for coin, cryptocurrencies actually are mining the public... Stay away is our ongoing and unwavering advice.

We wish you a wonderful year-end and remind you that you best dream in a pragmatic way ☺ Next letter in 2018

## Market Weekly Highlights:

- The DXY is at 93.35, slightly down this Friday after opening the week at almost 94. It still is down almost 8.50% for the year. The USD is still down against the Euro for the week and trading at 1.1846 despite the Catalan Separatist Vote which is weighing on Stocks and Euro as we write. The CHF is almost unchanged against the USD for the week at 0.9895 as is the Pound showing 1.3385. The Japanese Yen finished last week at 112.60 is weakening against the USD trading back at 113.35 as we watch. The Russian Ruble, which traded slightly down against the USD for weeks and reaching about 60.50 despite the gains in oil, has now gained some ground trading at 58.28. The Brazilian Real is higher against the USD for the week at just above 3.30. Crude oil WTI is up 1\$ for the week to \$58.13 a barrel; whilst Brent is trading at about \$64.76.
- 10Y U.S. Treasuries which have traded in a range during this last quarter with yields from 2.30% to 2.40%; have lost value in price with yielding reaching 2.50% this week. The US yield curve is flattening, Janet Yellen noted this in her goodbye speech last week, telling investors not to worry as it doesn't foretell a recession is coming. The Japanese 10 year JGB yield is trading sideways this week and continues to offer a POSITIVE yield, at 0.048%. In Europe German Bund yield seems to have found a floor around 0.30% and have rebounded for the week at 0.41%, the French 10Y Yield have followed a similar path marking 0.74%. In Peripheral Europe Italian 10Y yields are now just below 2.0% trading at 1.93%, and above where they started the year at 1.73%, whilst the Spanish 10Y yields trade some 40bps lower than Italy at 1.51% but higher than where they started the year at 1.30%.
- Equity Markets in US are positive with all three major indices up and with DJIA and SP500 reaching new all time highs earlier this week. The DJIA is above 24'780, up 1.12% for the week, SP500 at just above 2'684, 1.23% higher for the week and Nasdaq just above 6'965, up some 1.59% as of yesterday's close. In Europe markets are still showing positive returns with the exception of DAX and Eurostoxx50 which are down respectively 0.10% and 0.21 this week. Indeed today all European markets are trading down losing some of the gain made during the week on the Catalan separatist win in yesterday's votation as announced this morning. The IBEX which is losing 1.16% as we write has managed to stay positive for the week at 0.34%. The Nikkei trades up by 1.55% for the week on the back of the Yen weakening and still showing strong positive returns for the year of almost 20%.



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