

Macro Keys

US Equities: Endgame Approaching?

Global Macro Strategy

Global

2,611 Days

In our 10/30/15 note [Signs of The Top?](#), we posited that the Bull Market had entered into the "Late Innings", categorized by surging M&A volumes, cyclically higher volatility and imminent Fed rate hike(s). Just this week, the current Bull became the second longest in history, 5 months after a "Fed liftoff" which was followed by the most volatile equity market selloff/recovery sequence in decades. The recent leadership change, into Financials and away from Utilities and Staples is typical as Fed hikes usually signal more growth even as the "endgame" crystallizes (Figure 1). What is "different this time" is that there is no sign of an economic acceleration even as multiples expand. UBS forecasts US GDP in 2016 of 1.5%, below the Fed's inflation measure, Core PCE, UBSe 1.6%. Periods of inflation above growth do not necessarily signal an imminent market downturn, but they have historically rewarded earnings growers over both defensive and cyclical groups (see 4/12, [Q1 Earnings: Will Better than Expected be Good Enough?](#)) while being accompanied by greater market risk.

The Tails: Going Stag(flation) vs. Politics as (Un)usual

YTD 2016 has shown that high volatility – market perception of risk – works to the upside as well as the downside. In this spirit, we revisit our downside (1,750) and upside (2,500) scenarios from 11/10/15's [US Outlook 2016](#) and 1/28/16's [What If...Global Risk Scenarios](#). To the downside, a listless economy while inflation creeps high enough to "force the Fed's hand" is the main risk, while the uncertainty of US political regime change has a mixed history with regard to market direction, with volatility as the common denominator. As stocks have priced out a great deal of uncertainty, trading toward the high end of their range while VIX hovers near the low end, we believe near term caution is warranted set against the backdrop of an eventual move to new all-time highs ([see 4/29, Hedging S&P 500 Downside](#)).

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Figure 1: Endgame Approaching – How High, How Long?

Date of 1st Rate Hike	Advance from 1st Hike (%)	Time to Market Top (# months)	Fed Funds Rate Range (Tightening)
8/14/1977	41.1%	41	6.00 - 20.00%
12/16/1986	34.7%	8	6.00 - 7.25%
3/29/1988	41.9%	28	6.50 - 9.75%
6/30/1999	11.3%	9	4.75 - 6.50%
6/30/2004	37.2%	40	1.00 - 5.25%
12/16/2015	?	?	0.25 - ?..??%
Average	33.2%	25	

Source: Federal Reserve, Bloomberg, UBS

2,611 Days

Given the frustration of the past two years' extremely violent sideways trading, the majesty of the 7+ year S&P 500 bull market is frequently forgotten (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Wonder Years



Source: Bloomberg, UBS

And while age alone does not portend the definitive end of a Bull Market, the current rally, at 2,611 days, is now the second longest in modern history, behind only the 1990-2000 bull market (Figure 3).

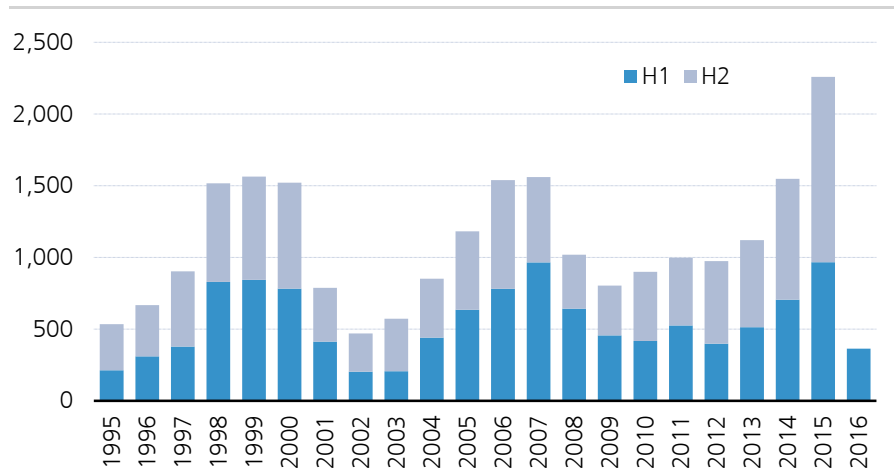
Figure 3: The Running of the Bulls

Start	End/ Current	S&P 500 Min	S&P 500 Max	Length (months)	Return
6/1/1932	3/10/1937	4.4	18.67	58	324%
3/31/1938	11/9/1938	8.5	13.79	7	62%
4/11/1939	10/25/1939	10.42	13.21	7	27%
4/28/1942	5/29/1946	7.47	19.25	50	158%
6/13/1949	8/2/1956	13.55	49.74	87	267%
10/22/1957	12/12/1961	38.98	72.64	50	86%
6/26/1962	2/9/1966	52.32	94.06	44	80%
10/7/1966	11/29/1968	73.2	108.37	26	48%
5/26/1970	1/11/1973	69.29	120.24	32	74%
10/3/1974	9/21/1976	62.28	107.83	24	73%
3/6/1978	1/6/1981	86.9	138.12	35	59%
8/12/1982	8/25/1987	102.42	336.77	61	229%
12/4/1987	7/16/1990	223.92	368.95	32	65%
10/11/1990	3/24/2000	295.46	1527.46	115	417%
10/9/2002	10/9/2007	776.76	1565.15	61	101%
3/6/2009	Current	683.38	2095.15	87	207%
Avg. (ex. current):				46	138%

Source: Bloomberg, UBS

Yet the current milestone comes just as "Signs of The Top" become clearer – a surge in M&A activity in 2015 exceeding the heady days of 1999-2000 and 2007 followed by a lull in deal-making (Figure 4) catalyzed by extreme market volatility, ending in the largest quarterly rebound since 1933, from -11.4% to close the quarter +0.8%.

Figure 4: The M&A Volume Spike (\$bn)

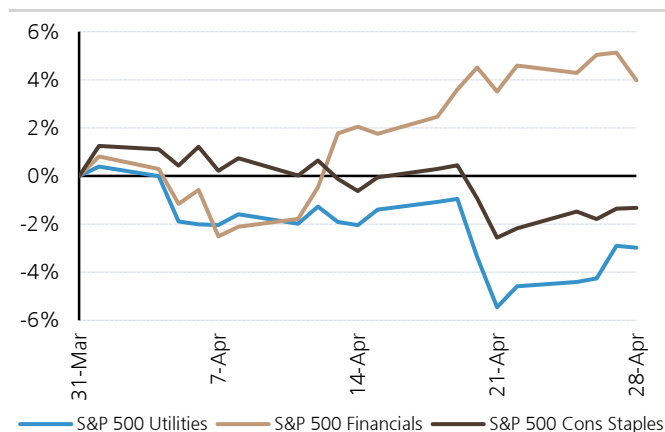


Source: Dealogic, UBS

The equity market volatility comes on the heels of the Fed's first rate hike in 9 years, on 12/16/2015, the first hike in the cycle traditionally being the demarcation point for the "countdown to the bull market peak" (Figure 1, p.1) with an intervening "time to the top" of as short as 8 months to as long as 41 months post the first hike.

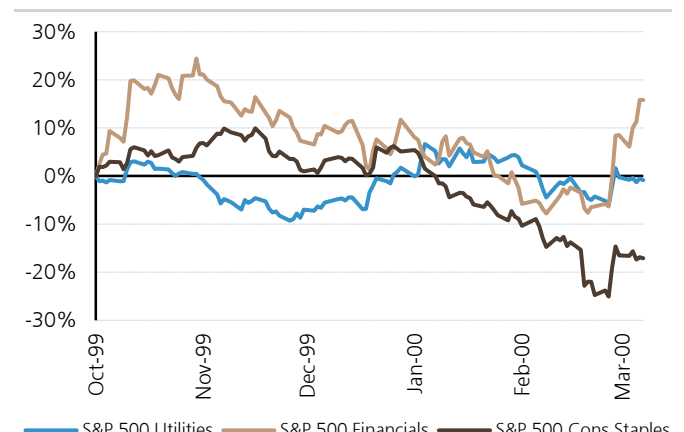
The leadership change of recent weeks, into Financials and away from Utilities and Staples (Figure 5) is reminiscent of the last stages of the 1999-2000 bull market top (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Late Cycle Rotation Beginning?



Source: Bloomberg, UBS

Figure 6: We've Seen this Motion Picture Before

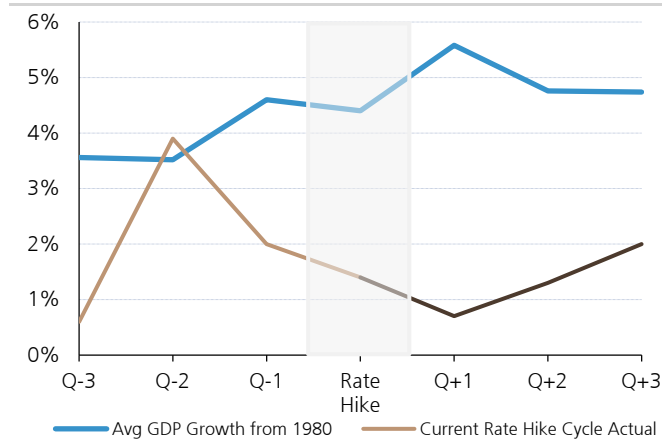


Source: Bloomberg, UBS

While this rotation reinforces our view that ultimately new all-time highs will be seen in the S&P 500 before the bull cycle ends, the immediate challenge for both

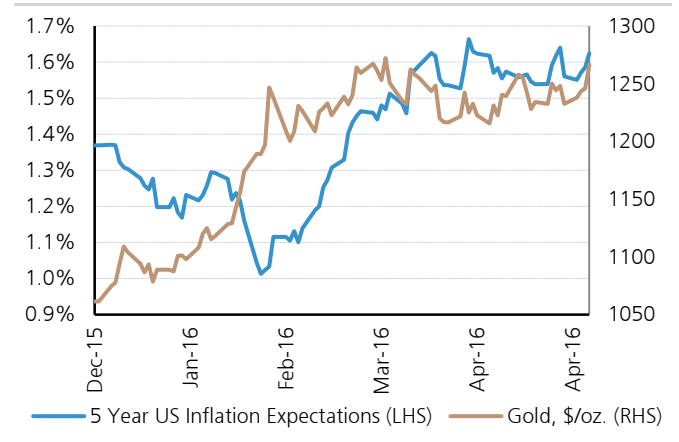
markets and the Fed is that the economy stubbornly refuses to accelerate, inconsistent with the roadmap of prior rate hike cycles (Figure 7) even as inflation expectations begin to build (Figure 8).

Figure 7: A Rate Hike Cycle Unlike All the Rest



Source: Bloomberg, UBS

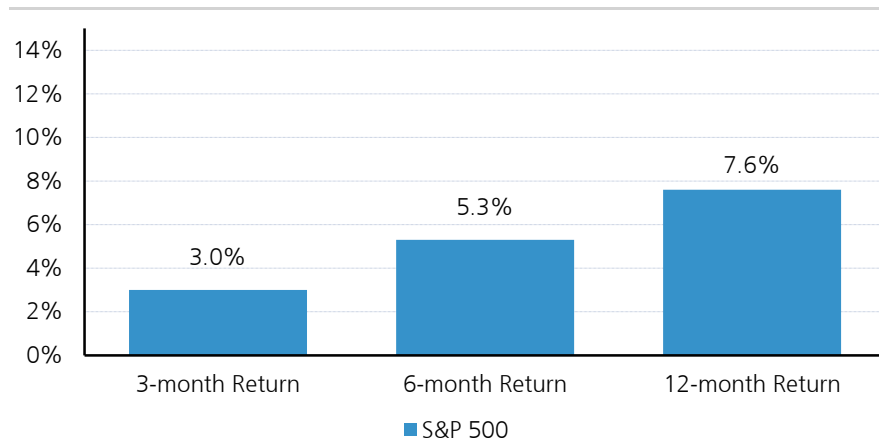
Figure 8: Inflation – In the Eye of the Beholder



Source: Bloomberg, UBS

Periods of inflation as measured by the Fed's preferred inflation indicator, Core PCE, in excess of US GDP do not in and of themselves necessarily signal an imminent market downturn (Figure 9).

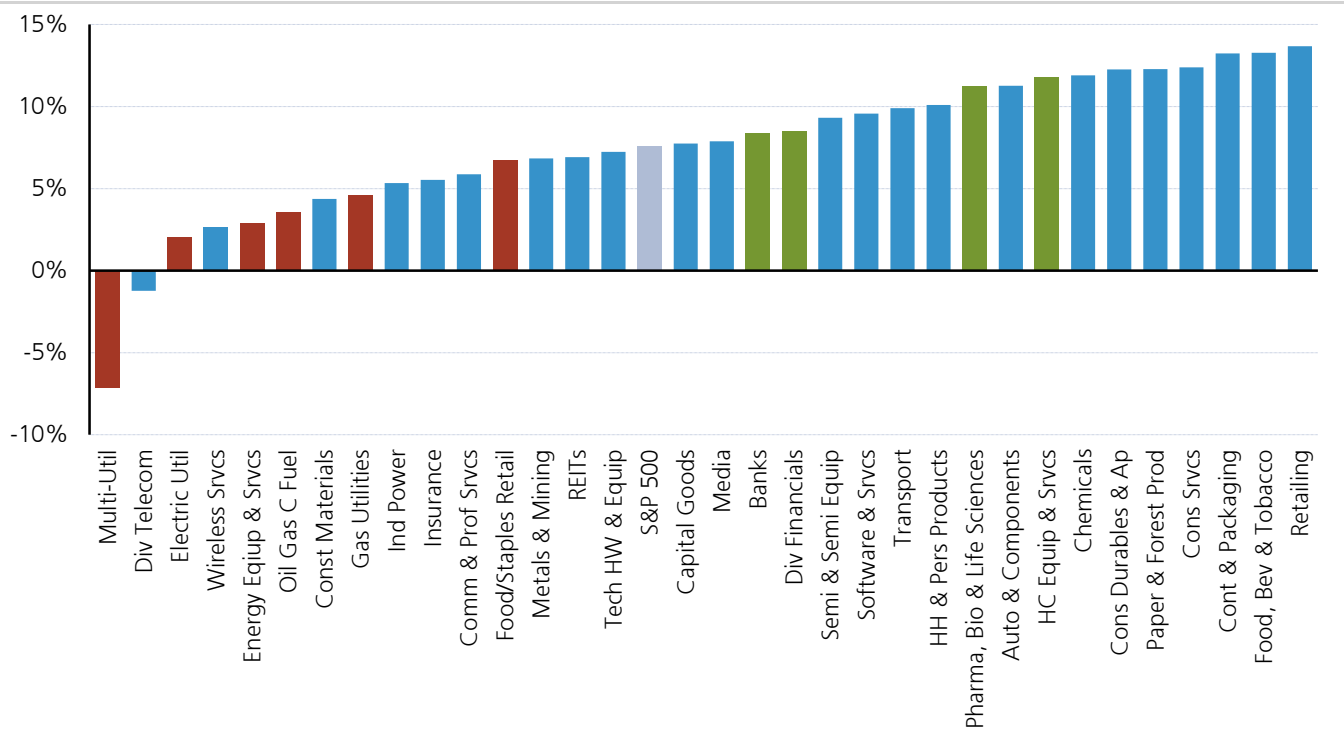
Figure 9: 3/6/12 Month Forward Returns when Core PCE > GDP (1990-Present)



Source: Bloomberg, UBS

Such periods in time have historically rewarded earnings growers, GARP, over both defensive and cyclical groups, Earnings Overachievers (Figure 10), lists of stocks with similar characteristics can be found in US Equity and Derivatives Strategy note from 4/12, [Q1 Earnings: Will Better than Expected be Good Enough?](#) on pages 7-8.

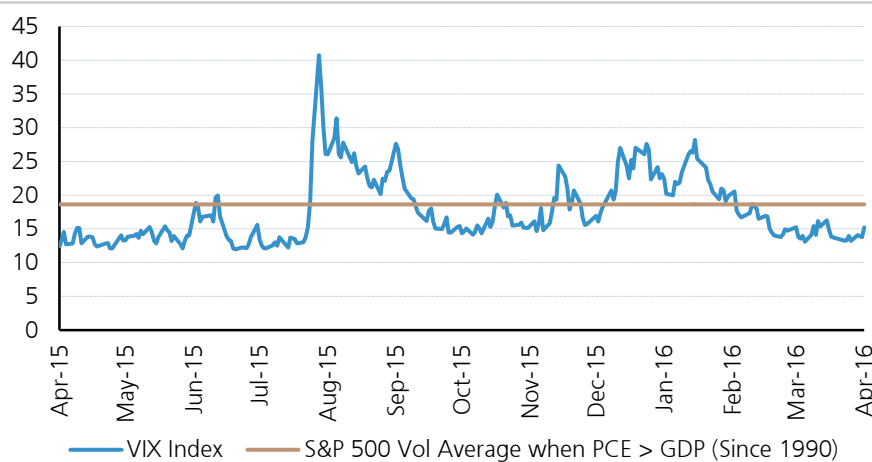
Figure 10: Industry Group Return Averages When Core PCE > GDP (1990-Present)



Source: Bloomberg, UBS

What has been a consistent feature of these periods where Core PCE is greater than US GDP is elevated volatility – greater risk – and in this context we would expect a reversion to the longer run mean (Figure 11) in the days and weeks ahead as the uncertainty over Fed policy, BOJ policy, the US economy, and politics, both abroad and in the US, persists and likely intensifies.

Figure 11: Temporary Calm Within the Storm?



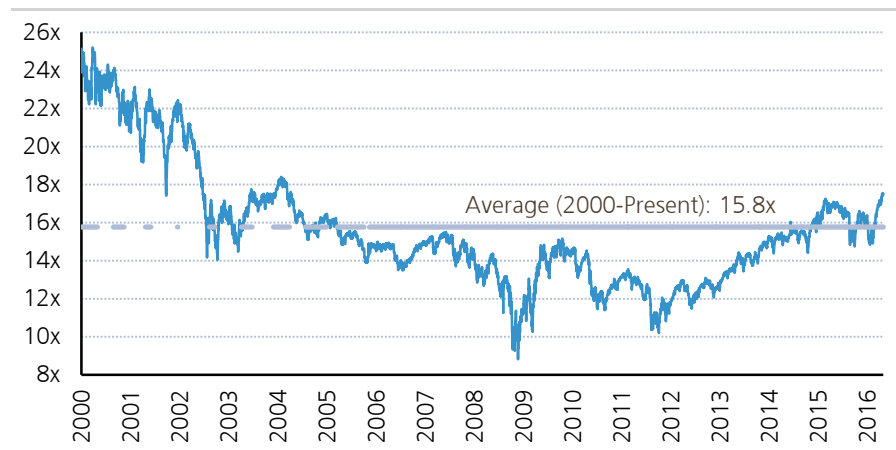
Source: Bloomberg, UBS

The Tails: Going Stag(flation) vs. Politics as (Un)usual

Secure in the knowledge that high volatility works to the upside as well as the downside, reinforced by the rollercoaster that has been the first four months of 2016, we revisit our downside (1,750) and upside (2,500) scenarios from 11/10/15's [US Outlook 2016](#) and 1/28/16's [What If...Global Risk Scenarios](#), set against our year end S&P 500 price target of 2,175, unchanged from early February.

To the downside, a listless economy insufficiently strong to propel earnings on a trajectory where 2017 growth expectations are achievable (Consensus expects +14.3%, UBSe +5.9%) while inflation creeps high enough to "force the Fed's hand" [What If...Global Risk Scenarios](#), p. 2 is the main risk, particularly since the Fed's most recent commentary has downplayed the threat of International (China) instability. Such a combination would likely stir talk of "stagflation", a malady endemic of the late 1970's and early 1980's, an era where much of the time P/E's fell below 10x; on 2017E earnings of \$126, 1,750 would represent a multiple of 13.9x, well within the range of some of the more stressed periods of the past 10 years (Figure 12).

Figure 12: S&P 500 Forward PE (2000-Current)



Source: FactSet, UBS

For most of the past 6 months, the political risk associated with the impending regime change in Washington DC has been part of the background, largely dominated by noise surrounding recession fears, China volatility, gridlock in the High Yield and Energy markets and the uncertain evolution of Fed policy.

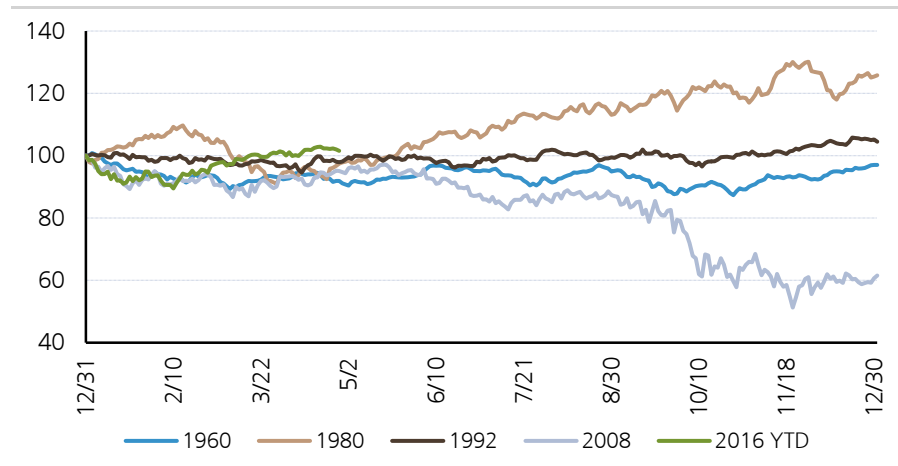
While in aggregate, presidential election years since 1901 have on average been flat in the first half of the year and showed strong gains (averaging around 7%) in 2H, the performance in eighth years of presidential terms has been decidedly downbeat, perhaps as a reflection of change being a legal imperative rather than the electorate's choice. These years include the bear markets of 2008 (Financial Crisis), 2000 (Tech Bubble burst) and the stagnant tape of 1960, a year that ushered in an unprecedented decade of social unrest during the Vietnam War.

Given the restless nature of the electorate in 2016 which has fostered the rise of a number of "outsider candidates" we believe the best way to examine the

prospective equity market movements of the next 8 months is to zero in on other years where the potential for change was palpable. Generational change votes such as Kennedy vs. Nixon, 1960 – Kennedy was the youngest US president elected to office and Obama vs. McCain, 2008 – Obama born in the tumultuous 1960's or those contests marked by significant third party candidates, Reagan vs. Carter vs. Anderson, 1980 and Clinton vs. Bush vs. Perot 1992 were other such similar times of prospective transformation.

While stocks performed differently in the analogous election years of 1960, 1980, 1992 and 2008 (Figure 13) the common denominator was market volatility.

Figure 13: S&P 500 Election Year Returns (Indexed to 100)



Source: Bloomberg, UBS

With the S&P 500 having rallied 16% off its February low in a frantic 10 weeks as the VIX first overshot to the upside then overshot to the downside, plunging to 12.5 on April 20, the uncertainties engendered by global Central Banks, politics and geopolitics, and the relationship of growth vs. inflation leave us cautious on the near term prospects for US equities.

To be clear, we maintain the view that the S&P 500 will end 2016 at 2,175, driven by a prospective earnings recovery fuelled by a recovery in economic growth to 2.5% in 2017E, set against low but rising interest rates and a stable oil price.

For ideas on how to hedge near term equity market risk, please see US Equity and Derivatives Strategy, 4/29, [Hedging S&P 500 Downside](#).

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