

After a long period of respectable returns, many investors in equities during the fourth quarter of 2018 experienced losses. This fourth quarter was filled with a great deal of uncertainty, which is the equity markets least favorite scenario. Major concerns included interest rate hikes and trade wars. A high percentage of this quarter's losses came during a disappointing December, when all three major US indexes dropped at least 8.7 percent for the month. The Dow Jones Industrial Average (DJIA or Dow) and S&P 500 also recorded their biggest monthly loss since February 2009.

For the quarter, the S&P 500 and NASDAQ dropped 14 percent and 17.5 percent, respectively, their worst quarterly performances since the fourth quarter of 2008. The Dow recorded its worst period since the first quarter of 2009, falling nearly 12 percent. As bad as they were, the final numbers do not fully explain just how wild a ride December really was for investors. Based on the lowest levels of the S&P 500 on Christmas Eve, the index was down over 20 percent from its record high on an intraday basis, briefly meeting the requirement for a bear market. The stock market would then come rising back in the next session, with the Dow over 1,000 points on December 26th, its biggest ever point gain.

Many market analysts felt the declines were driven by concerns of an economic slowdown and fears the Federal Reserve might be making a monetary policy mistake. In December, the Fed raised interest rates once again by 0.25%, elevating the U.S. Federal Funds rate range to 2.25% - 2.50%. The Fed has also forecasted additional rate hikes in 2019 and that was not helpful for equity markets.

The continuing concern over ongoing trade negotiations between China and the U.S. also pressured equities this quarter.

While a correction (defined as a drop of over 10%) in equity markets is not uncommon, there was one interesting characteristic of the fourth-quarter market: intraday volatility. During the fourth quarter the Dow had a record number of sessions with intraday 500+ point swings. That is roughly 2% of the current level of the Dow. The Dow had



MONEY RATES

(as posted in Barron's 12/31/2018)

	LATEST WEEK	YR AGO
Fed Funds Rate (Avg. weekly auction -c)	2.36%	1.42%
Bank Money Market -z	0.22%	0.14%
12-month Cert -z	0.88%	0.42%

c- Annualized yields, adjusted for constant maturity, reported by the Fed Reserve on a weekly average basis. z - Bankrate.com (Source: Barron's; bankrate.com)

	MONTH	QUARTER	2018
Dow	-8.7%	-11.8%	-5.6%
S&P 500	-9.2%	-14%	-6.2%
Nasdaq	-9.5%	-17.5%	-3.9%

(Source: Barron's 12/31/18)

five consecutive sessions with 500+ point swings from December 4 to December 11. This unusually high intraday volatility attracted a lot of media attention and it seemed as if the stock market was one of the main discussion topics every night on the news. *(Source: Seeking Alpha 12/2018)*

A Review of 2018

After 2017 featured strong equity returns and an environment of very low volatility, 2018 tested the commitment of long-term investors. 2018 was characterized by the return of volatility, record highs and sharp reversals. It also resulted in the first time ever the S&P 500 posted a decline after rising in the first three quarters and the first time since 1978 that the Dow finished out the year in the red after rising in the first three quarters.

According to Morningstar Research, results for 2018 “were even worse for those invested in markets outside the United States.” The MSCI EAFE Index (an equity index which captures large and mid-cap representation across 21 Developed Markets not including the US and Canada) plunged about 14% in U.S. dollar terms. Morningstar noted that a variety of concerns hurt international markets. These included local political issues and troublesome economic data. Many other stock markets abroad also posted deeper losses than those in the U.S. For example, China’s Shanghai Composite entered a bear market in June and declined nearly 25% in 2018. The Shenzhen Composite (which includes many of the country’s tech firms) dropped by over 33% for the year.

Economic growth in the U.S. was much stronger than that of Europe, where the trends that finally had moved in a positive direction reversed course, with growth rates down to near zero or even dipping into negative territory in some countries. Europe’s biggest market, the United Kingdom, has been stressed by uncertainty over the details of its path to exit the European Union. Political difficulties in Italy and other European countries didn’t help matters.

For the past decade, income vehicle returns have been significantly lower than equity returns and cash equivalents brought in very little. Although they add less return, low return cash equivalents and income vehicles provided less

volatility and stress. Many investors abandoned diversification and fully allocated into potentially higher returning stocks. This strategy can be advantageous when markets rise, but dangerous when they fall. Sometimes, investors are emotionally driven to change their allocations, but doing so could add additional risk.

After almost a decade of strong equity returns, 2018 was a confusing and difficult year for investors. After the poor year end close, it’s easy to forget that the Dow recorded 15 new highs in 2018 (ahead of the annual average of 11 new highs per year since inception). While the Dow reached more new highs in 2017 (71 in total, more than any year in history), there have been 53 calendar years when the DJIA notched at least 1 new high and 70 when none were recorded. For most investors, 2018 fully tested their commitment and patience. *(Source: Seeking Alpha 12/2018)*

2019 Outlook

Stocks may be coming off their worst year since the financial crisis, but for 2019, many analysts feel that equity markets will head higher. Over 65 percent of 29 respondents to CNBC’s exclusive “Halftime Report Stock Survey” said their overall stock market outlook is positive. Over 58 percent feel that equities look cheap at current valuations. CNBC noted that no one responded that he or she believes equities are overvalued at current levels. About 41 percent believe stocks are correctly valued, and nearly 60 percent felt current valuations look cheap, which indicates an overall bullish sentiment. *(Source: CNBC 1/7/2019)*



Forbes, in a 2019 Outlook asked, “What do stocks do after a down year?” They felt 2018’s decline might not be the best forecast and shared, “Let’s pull out all the down years from 1926 through 2017, of which there were 24. The average return in the year following a down year was 10 percent, the same as the overall average.” They also reported that, “Uncertainty about the future course of stocks is large, so investors should fall back on a few fundamental principles. Diversification of investments reduces risk.” *(Source: Forbes 1/5/2019)*

Barron’s 2019 Outlook felt that investors will be happy to bid good riddance to 2018, a stressful year marked by two stock market corrections, rising interest rates, an ugly trade

battle, and growing fears that a bear market lies just around the corner. All 10 market strategists Barron's consulted in late December had 2019 targets for the S&P 500 index finishing the year higher. (Source: Barron's 12/14/2018)

Seeking Alpha notes that, "Forecasting how 2019 will play out may be pure guesswork under the current circumstances." They also add that, as we begin the year, there is a shut-down of important U.S. government services and a new political landscape (a Democratic Congress). They also report that although the Federal Reserve has raised rates and the global Trade War is far from being resolved, current economic indicators are not pointing to an immediate recession. They cite that, on the employment front, we now have a tightening labor market with unemployment down to 3.7%. They share that, *The Index of Leading Economic Indicators* (which consists of ten forward-looking variables such as; unemployment claims, manufacturing shipments and orders, housing starts, interest rate spreads, M2 money supply, the S&P 500, and consumer sentiment) is still in expansion territory as of 1/1/2019.

Interest Rates are Still Critical

Three years ago, the Fed moved away from the near-zero rate that had been in place since the days of the global financial crisis. In December, the Fed raised interest rates for the fourth time in 2018 to move the target range for its benchmark fund to 2.25 percent to 2.5 percent. As of that session, Fed officials forecasted two more hikes in 2019, down from three rate raises previously projected.

While investors wanted certainty about rate hikes ending, the Fed included in its statement that further "gradual" rate hikes would be appropriate. Besides potential rate hikes, further trade wars with China can keep markets very volatile in 2019. Trade wars and signs China's economy is slowing have added to the global uncertainty. Interest rates, trade wars and worldwide growth rates should all be on an investor's watch list for 2019.

Conclusion:

What should an investor consider?

While many analysts remain optimistic, investors should not expect a straight-line uptrend. Corrections and bear markets will always be a part of the investment sequence. Although the old Wall Street joke can remind us that 10 out of 9 analysts can correctly predict the next recession, predicting exactly when equity markets will start back upward is near impossible. Investors with very long-time horizons of 10 to 20 years or longer can often accept more risk than those with shorter horizons. While past performance is no indication of future performance it still gives us data to think about. Based

KEY POINTS

1. Q4 finished 2018 with poor returns for equity investors.
2. After a quiet 2017, volatility returned to equity markets in a historic way in 2018.
3. The Fed raised U.S. Fed Fund rates to 2.25 - 2.50% in December and could raise interest rates again in 2019.
4. Key economic data indicators are still reasonable.
5. Analysts suggest 2019 will have positive equity returns.
6. Investors need to still be very cautious and watchful.
7. Focus on your personal goals and call us with any concerns.

on the DJIA, 10-year returns since the index's inception have averaged over 83%. This year, despite the negative performance, the 10-year return is an impressive 165%. How is that possible? It's because this most recent 10-year period began after the DJIA was beaten up during the financial crisis: since then, the DJIA has risen from approximately 8,800 to over 23,000. (Source: Seeking Alpha 1/4/2019)

CNBC reported on January 1st that some strategists are saying if the stock market's two worst fears are resolved in 2019, that it could be a good year for stocks. While strategists see volatility continuing in 2019, they felt that the biggest worries for investors are still trade wars and the Fed's interest rate movements. While many analysts remain optimistic, again, investors should still not expect a straight-line uptrend.

Knowledge is Powerful

While the nightly news and financial tabloids like to use harsh and scary language to attract viewers, oftentimes their quick views of equity market performance include media magnification, which is the act of making something look larger than it is.

Currently, equity markets are volatile and have experienced a correction (some are even in bear market territory), but not

a crash. Most corrections are not market crashes. If you recall the October 19th, 1987 market drop of 508 points (a 22.6% decline), that clearly is a market crash. The same percentage decline for the Dow if it happened on January 2nd, 2019 would have been over 5,000 points (which clearly did not happen).

It is often said that an emotional investor can make decisions that might not work out best. An informed and knowledgeable investor can many times be less emotional. Differentiating a correction (with a frequency on average of once a year) from a bear market (with a frequency on average of once every three years) can help investors when making decisions. Completely avoiding market risk may not be appropriate for many investors and today's traditional fixed rates might not help you achieve your desired goals. (Source: NASDAQ)

For 2019, let's focus on YOUR personal goals and strategy.

We focus on your own personal objectives. Now is the time to make sure you are comfortable with your investments.



CAUTION is still the principal notion for investors.

Market volatility has caused concern, but panic is not a plan. This is the ideal time to ensure that you fully

Common Market Terminology	
% Drop	Typically Referred to as:
Less than 5%	Dip
5 to 10%	Pullback
10% +	Correction
20% +	Bear Market

Stock market crash - a sudden and significant decline in equity prices of a very short period of time.

Recession - an economic term that refers to a general slowdown in economic activity, generally defined as two consecutive quarters of negative GDP growth. While the effects of a recession often cause the stock market to fall, **the term itself doesn't refer to a specific type of market activity.**

review and understand your time horizons, goals and risk tolerances.

If you would like to revisit your specific holdings or risk tolerance please call our office or bring it up at our next scheduled meeting.

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- ✓ a schedule of regular client meetings, and
- ✓ continuing education for every member of our team on the issues that affect our clients.

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