June 15, 2024

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The Fed That Never Stands Still

Key Takeaways

- Last week, global markets anxiously anticipated key updates on US monetary policy and continued to react negatively to surprising political developments, particularly in France (please see Europe: Electoral Implications). Fed Chairman Powell defended both the Fed's steady monetary policy this month and the central bank's outlook for rate cuts over the next 2-3 years.
- The Fed deliberately sets monetary policy at "accommodative" or "restrictive" levels to manage US employment and inflation. Both represent deviations from long-term sustainable interest rates. US monetary policy is far more "activist" than in other regions. This partly reflects the greater variability in US employment. Having taken responsibility for the Great Depression, the Fed is careful to avoid deflationary monetary policy, even as inflation targets were badly missed in recent years.

AI's Expanding Role in Energy Transition

Key Takeaways

- Much has been written about the power-hungry nature of AI to disrupt progress on corporate and national goals of energy transition. But the technology itself also offers potential opportunities to save perhaps even more energy and shift energy demand to locations where supply is abundant, evening out demand in grids around the world.
- AI also has the potential to address a growing number of challenges including energy, food, water, and waste management. Here the magnitude of the problem gives a sense of the scope of opportunity.

Potential Portfolio Implications

- Some of the Fed's new economic projections were out of date on their first day of release. The bond market is still pricing in some probability of a Fed rate cut by September (65%) and one further step before year end. We think the probability of Fed easing is even higher.
- US stock/bond correlations have come down since the "Fed shock" of 2022. We continue to argue for intermediate-duration bond positions to lock in solid yields for longer than the Fed will remain tight. Global political developments also argue for allocations.
- For mega-tech players in the AI space, broader markets have already given abundant exposure for most portfolios, so we do not see the need to double down with a concentrated position. But the abundance of applications makes us more comfortable with the large positions that the wild market run-up has built in our portfolios. However, the potential opportunity to seek out specific companies applying AI-powered innovation to address challenges is compelling.

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The Fed That Never Stands Still

On Wednesday, Fed Chairman Powell had the unenviable task of defending the Fed's current monetary policy stance, its plans to reduce interest rates during the next two-to-three years, and the seeming discontinuity of it all within the Fed's updated economic forecasts.

Just as the US reported a flat month for consumer prices and a downside surprise in the core CPI, the Fed released its Summary of Economic Projections (SEP) with upgrades to the inflation forecast for 2024.

In April, the Fed's preferred measure of core inflation was down to a 2.75% year/year pace. CPI data reported on the morning of the Fed's press conference suggest a decline to 2.6% will be reported for the May reading when it's released on June 28. However, the Fed's projection for year-end 2024 was raised to 2.8%. This led reporters[1] to question whether the Fed sees an "acceleration in inflation coming."

Tempest in a tea pot

Under questioning, Fed Chair Powell noted that Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) participants were given the chance to alter their forecasts on Wednesday morning after seeing the new CPI data. Pushed further, his response was "most people don't." In essence, observers are splitting hairs over minor deviations in data subject to significant "randomness," sample-based errors, and yes, the limitations of human forecasters. Is 2.6% measured inflation really different from 2.8%? If you understand the survey samples and data construction process, we think you'll agree with us: it's virtually nothing.

More materially, as detailed in last week's CIO Bulletin and Data Watch, readings on the economy are now unusually conflicting. The gap between employment growth reported over the past 12 months in the survey of employers and the survey of households is at a record. Despite month/month volatility, we think evidence suggests a slowing in US employment growth is underway. In contrast, US monetary policy has done nothing but tighten in the past two years (see **FIGURE 1**). Asked why the Fed would consider easing monetary policy, Powell explained that the current level of US interest rates is restrictive, meaning that "the economy would weaken without cuts."

Many observers have difficulty understanding why the Fed doesn't just set US interest rates at levels it believes can be sustained for the longer run. Instead, the Fed deliberately sets monetary policy at "accommodative" or "restrictive" levels to sway inflation and employment. These settings are, by definition, not meant to be stable.

When Powell was questioned about the Fed's projections for a single rate cut within 2024, he noted the addition of more cuts to the Fed's projections in 2025. This simply signaled delay, not a real difference in the Fed's outlook for rate cuts. The Fed still expected it will take its key policy rate down to 3.1% by the end of 2026 (see **FIGURE 2**).

[1] FOMC Press Conference on June 12, 2024.

FIGURE 1: US nonfarm employment monthly change and Fed Funds rate

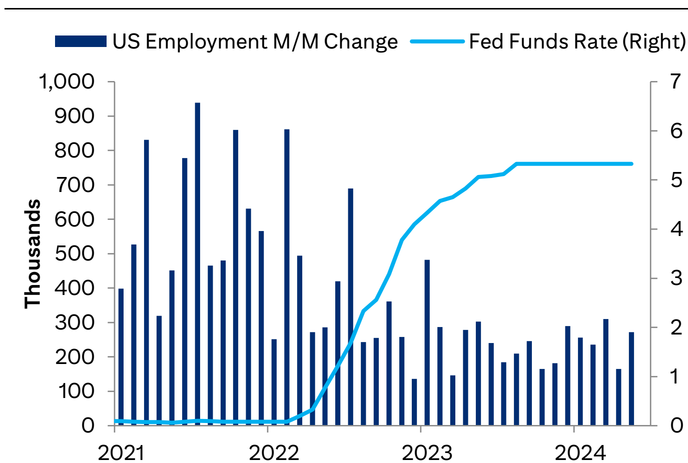
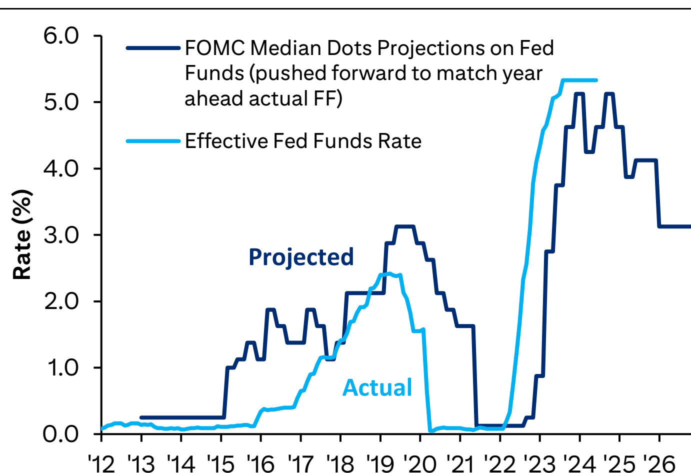


FIGURE 2: Fed's forecast for Fed Funds rate 12 months ahead vs actual



Source: Haver Analytics as of June 12, 2024. All forecasts are expressions of opinion and are subject to change without notice and are not intended to be a guarantee of future events

Our take on jobs and inflation

After experiencing two years of global inflation averaging near 7% following the pandemic, inflation has essentially normalized. This is not going to please a public that wishes consumer prices to roll back to pre-pandemic levels (see **FIGURE 3**). However, never in post-WWII history have major central banks attempted to purposely deflate the economy to recover lost purchasing power.

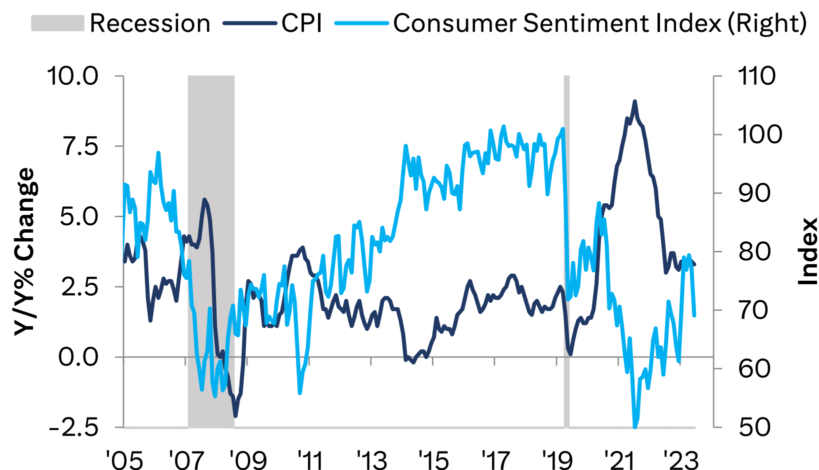
Japan ran a mildly deflationary monetary policy unintentionally for about 15 years, ending a decade ago with poor results. Among them, Japan's many attempts to stimulate growth resulted in a gross government debt to GDP ratio of 252%, more than double that of the US today.

Central banks can target 2% inflation, but when they "miss," there isn't a working strategy to make up for it with a below-2% target. The Fed, for one, won't sustain a deflationary monetary policy after taking responsibility for the Great Depression of the 1930s. While data for the month of May showed a strong gain for employment at US establishments, one risk Powell noted was that "The labor market has the tendency sometimes to weaken quickly. So, waiting for that to happen is not what we're doing."[2]

In conclusion, we believe that once the Fed decides inflation risks are clear, it will begin a process of cutting rates, perhaps routinely by 25 basis points. This is in line with its history of sustaining increases and cuts over a span of many meetings. Barring an economic catastrophe, the Fed will not bring rates back to zero. But there is good space to cut from 5.25%-5.5% – the current policy range – and what the Fed views as "longer-term normal." With an update, the Fed's new projection of this is 2.8%. We sense this estimate is still a bit too low. But unlike the 0.2% differences in inflation readings we mentioned, the gap between 3% and 5.5% for the Fed's policy rate is far from trivial.

[2] FOMC Press Conference on June 12, 2024.

FIGURE 3: US confidence still weak: consumer sentiment index vs US CPI Y/Y%



Source: Haver Analytics as of June 13, 2024. Indices are unmanaged. An investor cannot invest directly in an index. They are shown for illustrative purposes only and do not represent the performance of any specific investment. Index returns do not include any expenses, fees, or sales charges, which would lower performance. **Past performance is no guarantee of future results. Real results may vary.**

AI's Expanding Role in Energy Transition

In Wealth Outlook 2024 Mid-Year Edition, we delve into Artificial Intelligence's (AI's) rampant energy consumption along with its potential to drive the transition toward clean energy. We also offer guidance on risks and opportunities for investors positioning their portfolios for the energy transition – see Cleaner and smarter: How AI can help fuel the energy transition. Here we explore the potential for AI to address a growing number of societal and environmental challenges.

The potential applications of AI are vast and include faster drug discovery, precise medical diagnoses, personalized learning, disaster prediction and response, streamlined supply chains, increased agricultural yields, and improved customer service. AI's ability to optimize processes, accurately predict demand, and make data-driven decisions can also enhance society's efficiency in managing energy, food, water, and waste. Applying AI-powered innovation to address societal challenges has the potential to maximize economic value while minimizing ecological footprint.

Currently the AI revolution has the character of a gold rush and we see one way to invest in the space remains in mega-tech leaders, AI infrastructure, and to a lesser extent AI end users. In addition, we believe a compelling subset of potential opportunities in our ongoing AI-propelled digitization unstoppable trend include companies that are creating and/or employing solutions to sustainability challenges.

The bigger the problem, the bigger the potential opportunity

There is a class of problems that have been too costly or labor intensive for companies to address. These challenges tend to be less glamourous and are frequently neglected because the cost of solving them exceeds the value generated. For example, identifying individual strawberry plants with pests for hyper-localized and low waste insecticide application, or distinguishing which items in a generic stream of rubbish have enough copper that they're worth salvaging at today's market price. Addressing these problems often requires analyzing large, diverse, and unstructured visual datasets while making frequent, incremental decisions.

Twenty years ago, addressing these issues often required a person armed with a clipboard – an approach that was both labor-intensive and cost-prohibitive. Five years ago, addressing these challenges most likely required bespoke code –

tailored visual sorting software crafted for each unique application. This approach demanded continuous adjustments and meticulous attention, and it remained economically viable only within certain lucrative niches.

The era when specialized solutions were painstakingly developed for specific contexts, often at a considerable cost, is behind us. Today, AI can create solutions for generic problems and adapt to shifting inputs at an unprecedented rate. As a result, these challenges are increasingly resembling avenues to boost profitability while maintaining competitive pricing.

Energy: Distribution optimization

When considering the rapid expansion of intermittent energy sources, it is natural to question how the power grid can effectively harness the feast-or-famine nature of low-cost renewables without unnecessary waste. The challenge lies in integrating variable energy sources while maintaining grid stability. And while this has clearly become an enormous headache for utility providers, it has gradually evolved into a key element of business plans for high-tech companies.

Developing efficient energy storage technology is crucial. The world has long found ways to embody abundant energy into transportable objects, as can be seen by the historical geolocation of energy-hungry aluminum refineries in areas with enormous geothermal capacity. Cryptocurrency mining built itself around using only the cheapest of electricity, but the rapidly increasing size of the AI computing energy demand will create a way to effectively transport embodied energy across the globe at trivial costs. Implementing smart grid management that adapts to real-time conditions using reinforcement learning enables efficient energy distribution optimization[3]. Bottom line, AI can transform the electric grid into a more reliable and efficient system.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) included separate line items for data centers, cryptocurrency, and AI for the first time in its January 2024 report[4]. The IEA estimated that the three added together already accounted for 2% of global energy demand in 2022 and are set to double by 2026. While data centers typically need to be relatively close to population hubs, cryptocurrency and AI use vast amounts of power to create an easily transmittable digital product. Increasingly, AI is being used to calculate where it will be cheapest to run AI software. The IEA's 2026 estimate for energy use of data centers, cryptocurrency and AI at 1000 terawatt hours is roughly equivalent to a virtual country the size of Japan that can be shifted to where energy is abundant and cheap at any time of the day or night.

With the IEA forecasting renewable energy production overtaking coal as the largest source of electricity in early 2025, the ability to location shift power will be a key element in coping with an increasingly intermittent electricity production. Google parent company Alphabet has already announced plans to leverage its AI infrastructure for location-based energy optimization[5]. What's more, as high-tech companies compete to be leaders in AI, the power demands of AI are putting their net zero pledges in jeopardy, challenging them to find new ways to mitigate carbon-intensive operations[6].

Given that power remains the most significant ongoing expense in the AI revolution, we can expect widespread availability of hardware capable of efficiently redistributing substantial amounts of electricity. While this will not entirely remove the need for batteries to shift electricity across time, it will effectively link disparate grids around the world. As electricity and computation become more interchangeable commodities, their seamless integration allows for greater flexibility and efficiency. As a corollary, AI systems are poised to potentially benefit from electricity rates significantly below the global average. This cost advantage will be pivotal for the success of industries that heavily rely on AI and beyond.

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[3] Bousnina and Guerassimoff (2022). Deep Reinforcement Learning for Optimal Energy Management of Multi-energy Smart Grids. Retrieved from https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-95470-3_2

[4] IEA (2024), Electricity 2024, IEA, Paris https://www.iea.org/reports/electricity-2024, Licence: CC BY 4.0

[5] https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-25/ai-increases-data-center-energy-use-google-pioneered-technique-could-help

[6] Microsoft's AI Investment Imperils Climate Goal As Emissions Jump 30% - Bloomberg

Theme	Use Case
Geographic Flexibility	AI computations can be done in locations with abundant low-cost renewable energy, moving energy demand to where supply is most abundant.
Temporal Shifting	For non-real time urgent tasks, AI can time shift to periods of lowest price and environmental impact, smoothing energy demand.
Energy Storage Management	Time when to increase storage to avoid waste and diminish costs.
Transmission as Data	As the share of global electricity dedicated to computing grows, electricity grids will effectively be connected to each other, as compute tasks and their results will allow shifting energy demand to the locations with the most abundant clean energy.

Optimizing Food, Water and Waste

Food waste: An enormous problem (and opportunity)

Food waste poses global challenges with economic, environmental, and social implications. According to the United Nations, roughly one-third of all food produced is wasted, adding up to $750 billion in economic losses annually[7]. To help put this into context, it is estimated that an area equivalent to the combined size of the United States, India, and Egypt is dedicated to growing food that is never consumed[8]. All the while, amidst a series of geopolitical shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, global food insecurity has garnered increased attention.

Given agriculture's threefold role as a significant emitter of carbon, a major consumer of freshwater, and a sector profoundly impacted by climate change, it becomes a focal point in discussions about energy transition and the development of sustainable food systems – see Sustainable Investing Spotlight: Planting for tomorrow.

Leveraging AI, we can shift toward a model that minimizes food waste and pollution while simultaneously regenerating natural ecosystems, safeguarding and optimizing our food system. AI's applications span pricing, inventory management, and supply chain optimization to design out avoidable food, water, and energy waste. By using machine learning models, it can analyze real-time traffic data, store locations, and demand patterns to optimize food distribution while managing inventory, mitigating food spoilage and overbuying. It can also help source and track regeneratively grown produce or create alternatives such as plant-based meat, fish, and dairy products[9].

[7] https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/09/448652
[8] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2589014X2300186X
[9] https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/sustainability/our-insights/sustainability-blog/how-ai-can-unlock-a-127b-opportunity-by-reducing-food-waste

Theme	Use Case
Supply Chain Optimization	Demand forecasting and efficient supply chain management to reduce surplus and spoilage.
Smart Agriculture	Precision farming, plant-level monitoring for nutrients, autonomous tractors, pests and water. To minimize resource inputs and avoid toxic runoff.
Food Inventory Monitoring	Identify aging stock, dynamically adjust pricing to avoid waste. Reduce spoilage in transport.
Consumer Behavior Analysis	Predict household needs, identify foods that are aging in the fridge and suggest recipes that use what is on hand already.

Water waste: Every drop counts

The idea that the world needs to protect its valuable freshwater resources is not new as only about three percent of Earth's water is fresh water. Of that, only 1.2 percent can be used as drinking water[10]. Like energy utilities, AI has emerged as a critical tool for an industry focused on operational excellence.

Among other things, AI’s ability to detect leaks, optimize water usage, and enhance treatment processes minimizes water waste and promotes sustainable water management practices. In addition, AI can offer valuable insights for regions facing floods or droughts that impact critical areas such as infrastructure, agriculture, waterborne illnesses, and livelihoods. AI can process vast amounts of data to optimize water supply systems with the aim to reduce costs. By harnessing AI’s potential, the water industry can serve as a trailblazer for other sectors to emulate.

Theme	Use Case
Leak Detection	Monitor infrastructure for leaks, reducing water loss.
Irrigation Management	Optimize irrigation schedules based on real-time data, minimizing waste.
Demand Forecasting	Monitor and predict water usage patterns, helping utilities to manage supply.
Streamflow Forecasting	Hydrological AI modeling forecasts the accurate streamflow available for efficient water resource management.
Wastewater Treatment	Boost wastewater treatment efficiency, avoid over treatment to reduce energy consumption.

Recycling: Unearthing value

Recycling has gotten a black eye in recent years due to its overpromise and underperformance, especially in the domain of plastic recycling and lack of economic performance. The ability to shift sorting out of the hands of expensive humans to AI may help reverse these trends and improve the quality and quantity of material deflected out of trash streams.

[10] https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/earths-fresh-water/

Theme	Use Case
Automated Sorting	Replace humans in sorting recycling, decrease labor costs and increase recycling rates.
Material Recovery	Identify and recover valuable materials from waste streams.
Consumer Engagement	Help consumers correctly sort waste to minimize frustration and labor.

All this is not withstanding the risks and potential ethical dilemmas associated with AI. The promising applications are vast and AI's capacity to address a growing number of societal and environmental challenges can outweigh the energy and water consumption associated with its operation. We consider firms creating and/or employing solutions to challenges associated with energy, food, water, and waste, to be a compelling subset of opportunities within our ongoing AI-propelled digitization unstoppable trend.

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Medium grade	Baa	BBB	BBB
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Changes in Regulatory or Tax Treatment of Energy Related MLPs. If the IRS changes the current tax treatment of the master limited partnerships included in the Basket of Energy Related MLPs thereby subjecting them to higher rates of taxation, or if other regulatory authorities enact regulations which negatively affect the ability of the master limited partnerships to generate income or distribute dividends to holders of common units, the return on the Notes, if any, could be dramatically reduced. Investment in a basket of Energy Related MLPs may expose the investor to concentration risk due to industry, geographical, political, and regulatory concentration.

Mortgage-backed securities ("MBS"), which include collateralized mortgage obligations ("CMOs"), also referred to as real estate mortgage investment conduits ("REMICs"), may not be suitable for all investors. There is the possibility of early return of principal due to mortgage prepayments, which can reduce expected yield and result in reinvestment risk. Conversely, return of principal may be slower than initial prepayment speed assumptions, extending the average life of the security up to its listed maturity date (also referred to as extension risk).

Additionally, the underlying collateral supporting non-Agency MBS may default on principal and interest payments. In certain cases, this could cause the income stream of the security to decline and result in loss of principal. Further, an insufficient level of credit support may result in a downgrade of a mortgage bond's credit rating and lead to a higher probability of principal loss and increased price volatility. Investments in subordinated MBS involve greater credit risk of default than the senior classes of the same issue. Default risk may be pronounced in cases where the MBS security is secured by, or evidencing an interest in, a relatively small or less diverse pool of underlying mortgage loans.

MBS are also sensitive to interest rate changes which can negatively impact the market value of the security. During times of heightened volatility, MBS can experience greater levels of illiquidity and larger price movements. Price volatility may also occur from other factors including, but not limited to, prepayments, future prepayment expectations, credit concerns, underlying collateral performance and technical changes in the market.

An investment in alternative investments can be highly illiquid, is speculative and not suitable for all investors. Investing in alternative investments is for experienced and sophisticated investors who are willing to bear the high economic risks associated with such an investment. Investors should carefully review and consider potential risks before investing. Certain of these risks may include:

- loss of all or a substantial portion of the investment due to leveraging, short-selling, or other speculative practices;

- lack of liquidity in that there may be no secondary market for the fund and none is expected to develop;
- volatility of returns;
- restrictions on transferring interests in the Fund;
- potential lack of diversification and resulting higher risk due to concentration of trading authority when a single advisor is utilized;
- absence of information regarding valuations and pricing;
- complex tax structures and delays in tax reporting;
- less regulation and higher fees than mutual funds; and
- manager risk.

Individual funds will have specific risks related to their investment programs that will vary from fund to fund.

Asset allocation does not assure a profit or protect against a loss in declining financial markets.

Diversification does not guarantee a profit or protect against loss. Different asset classes present different risks.

The indexes are unmanaged. An investor cannot invest directly in an index. They are shown for illustrative purposes only and do not represent the performance of any specific investment. Index returns do not include any expenses, fees or sales charges, which would lower performance.

Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

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