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Fed Report

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The Fed's monetary policy has important implications for the bond, stock, and currency markets, and the economic cycle generally. In this report my goal is to track the data that I think Fed officials, and Chair Powell specifically, are most focused on based on ongoing public communications.

Fed's Dual Mandate

Established Objectives of Federal Reserve Monetary Policy:

Stable Prices ("Price Stability"): 2 percent inflation rate as measured by the annual change in the price index for personal consumption expenditures (Headline PCE YoY). The Powell Fed views the core (excluding food and energy) PCE as a better indication of future inflation. It is worth noting that the Fed interprets the inflation objective as symmetric, meaning they are trying to prevent persistent deviations, either above or below, from their 2 percent inflation target.

Maximum Employment: The highest utilization of labor resources that is sustainable over time, generally viewed as the unemployment rate that is consistent with low and stable inflation over the longer term- often estimated as the "natural rate of unemployment." The natural rate of unemployment comprises both the "frictional" unemployment of people who are temporarily between jobs or searching as they have reentered the labor force and the more "structural" unemployment of people whose skills or physical location are not a good match for the jobs available. In other words, the Fed aims to reduce "cyclical" unemployment. As Powell likes to point out, the unemployment rate that is consistent with maximum employment is largely determined by nonmonetary factors (i.e., not heavily influenced by Fed policy). The Fed has no fixed goal for this rate, the current longer run estimate for unemployment is 4.2%, from Fed's Summary of Economic Projections.

Fed Policy Tools

Federal Funds Rate: the primary policy tool of the Fed, it is the overnight benchmark interest rate. The Powell Fed aims for this rate to be at the estimated normal longer-run level when the policy objectives are met (i.e., when inflation is running at the target rate of 2% and the economy is operating at maximum employment).

Fed Balance Sheet: Quantitative Easing ("QE") is Fed balance sheet expansion via bond purchases using "printed money," Quantitative Tightening ("QT") is essentially the opposite, i.e., Fed balance sheet contraction via allowing bonds to mature without reinvesting the proceeds.

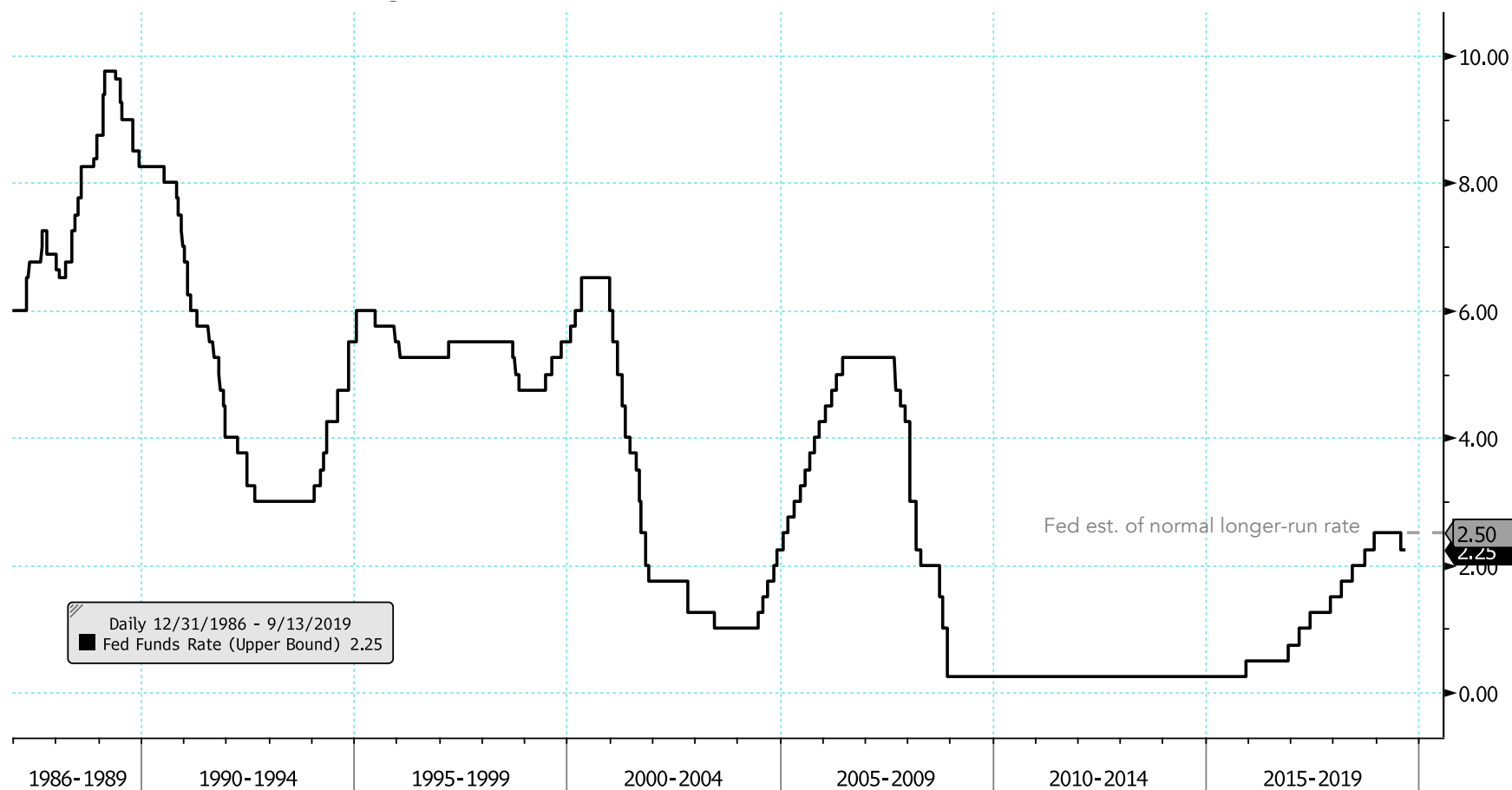
Forward Guidance: a commitment to hold rates at a certain level (e.g., zero) over a certain period of time.

Fed Key Concepts

Data Dependency: The Fed describes its policy making process as data dependent, which might be best summarized by Chair Powell's words: "Our views about appropriate monetary policy in the months and years ahead will be informed by incoming economic data and the evolving outlook. If the outlook changes, so too will monetary policy." Many of the following charts represent the relevant data followed by the Fed, and specifically by Chair Powell.

Fed Funds Rate

Fund funds rate (black) and Fed estimate (based on median dot) of normal longer run rate (grey)

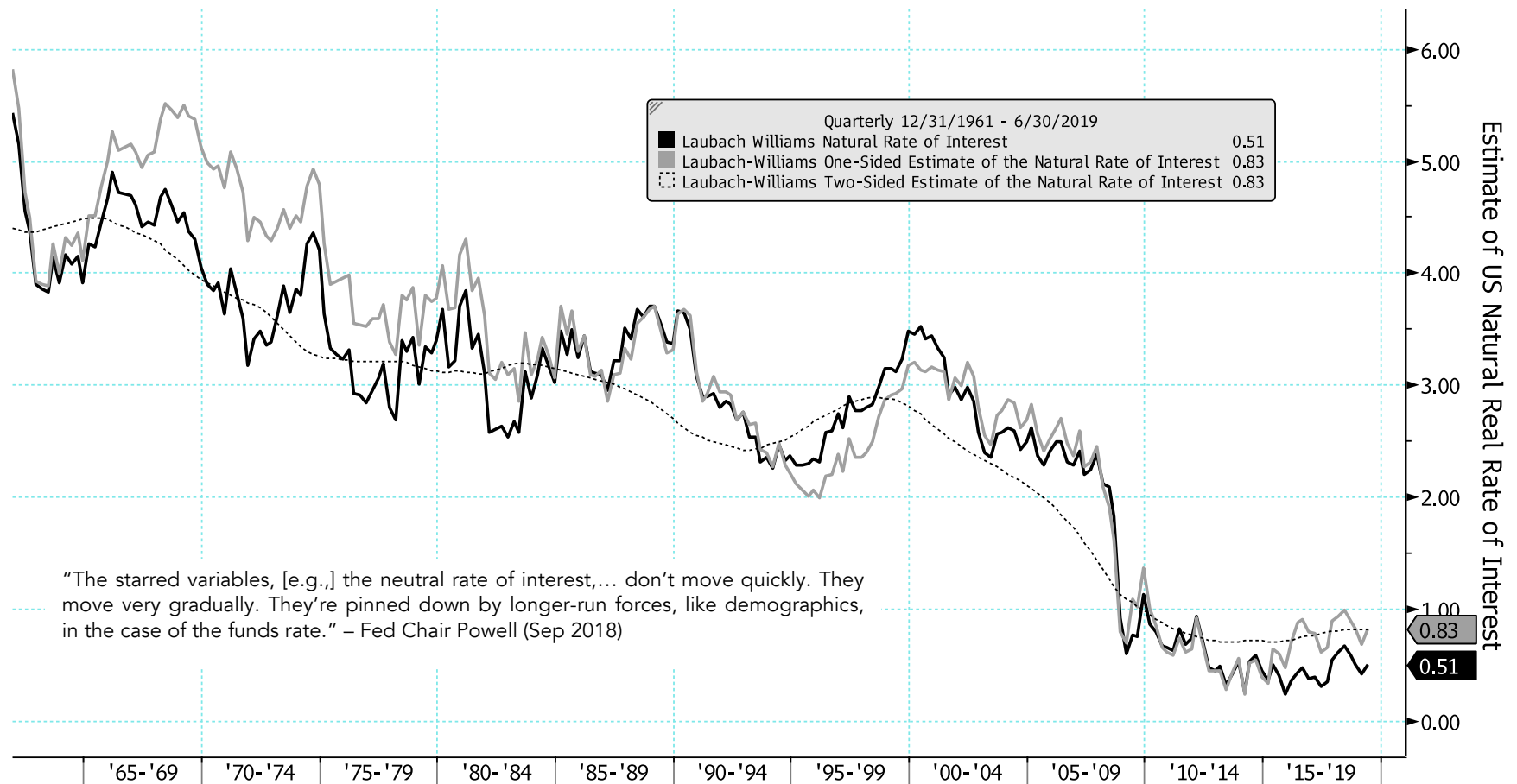


Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

*Analysis: Powell will likely cut another 25 bps at the September meeting.
For historical reference, former Fed Chair Greenspan cut rates only to hike them again later in the cycle in 1987, 1995, and 1998.*

Fed Estimate of the Natural Real Rate of Interest

"R-star" is the natural real rate of interest

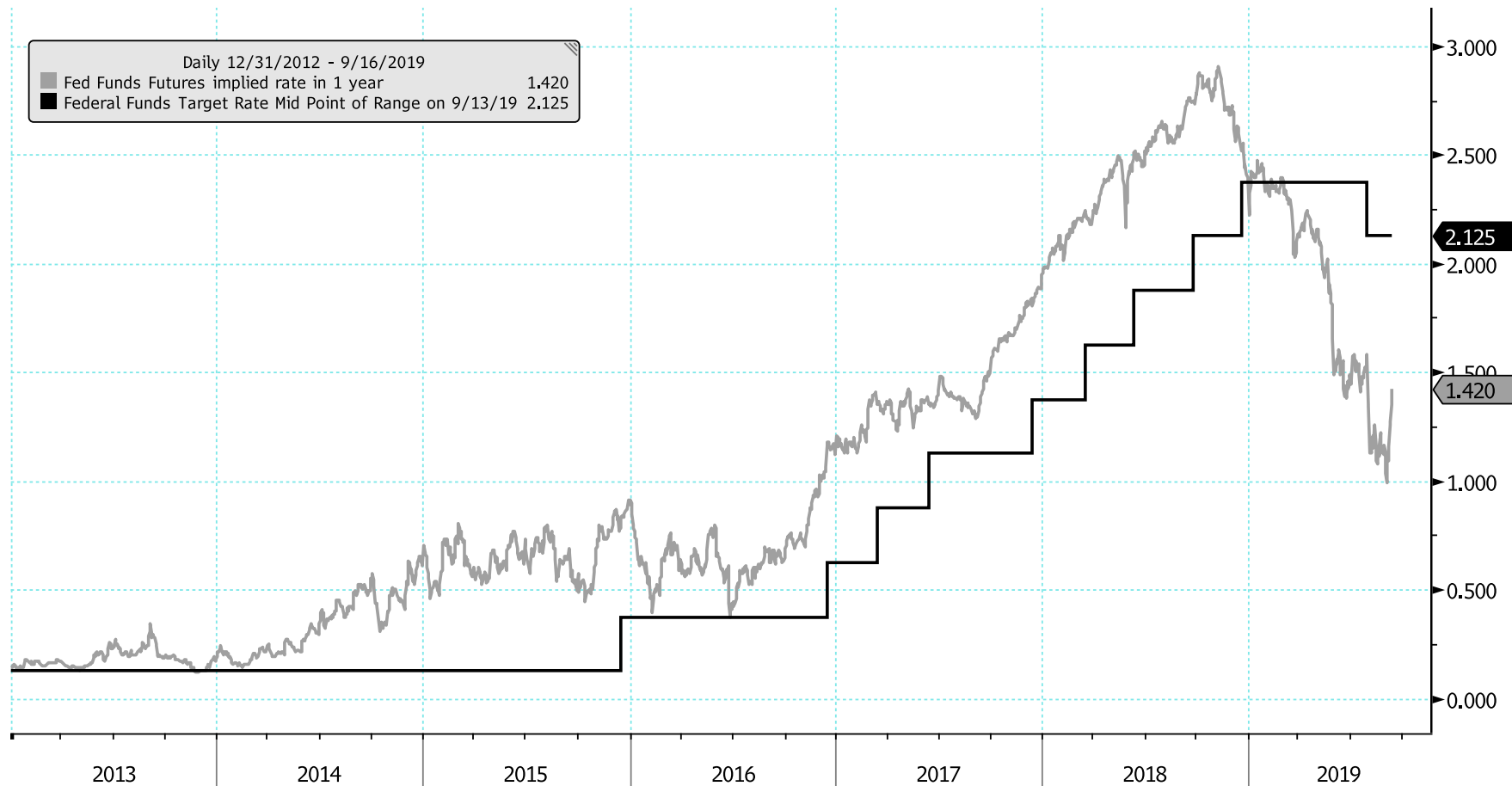


Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: Estimates of the natural real rate of interest have increased somewhat over the past quarter. As a general framework: if the natural real rate of interest is about 0.5% and inflation is about 2%, the neutral nominal rate should be about 2.5% (0.5% + 2%), which is roughly consistent with the Fed's longer run normal rate estimate shown on the previous slide.

Market Expectations of Fed Funds Rate in 1 year

What's Priced-in based on the +1-year Fed Funds Futures contract

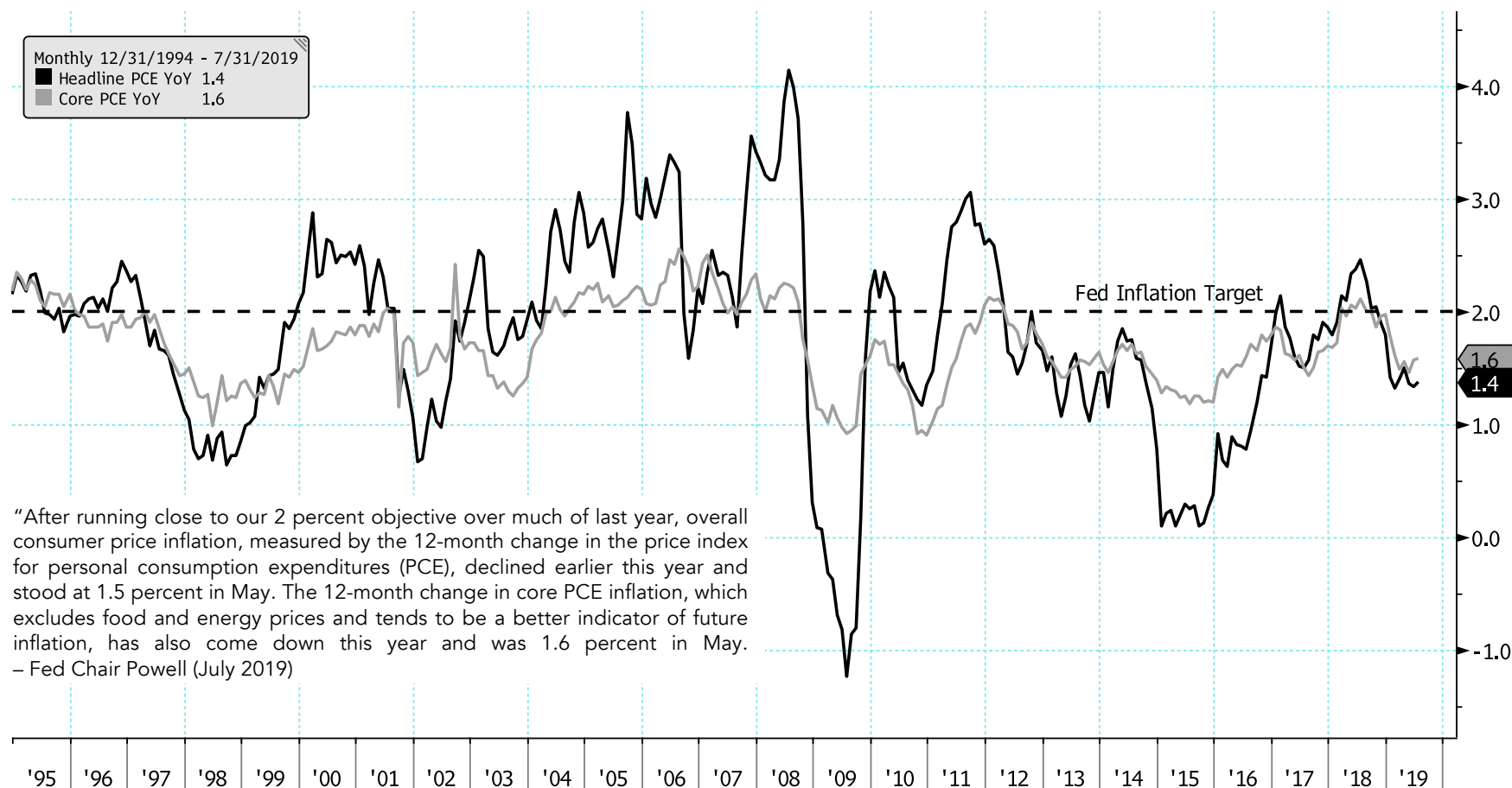


Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: Market expectations of the Fed funds rate in one year had continued to decline until the recent sharp increase. The market is pricing the Fed Funds rate in one year at 1.42%, which implies almost three 25 bp rate cuts in the coming year. (Fed funds futures are priced on the effective rate which is between the upper and lower bounds of the target range, the current Fed funds target midpoint is at 2.125% (between 2.00 and 2.25))

Inflation Readings

The Headline and Core (excluding volatile food and energy prices) Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Index YoY Seasonally Adjusted



Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: The July PCE data shows the headline inflation rate at 1.4%, below the target of 2.0%. The Fed expects PCE YoY to run at 1.5% and 1.9% in 2019 and 2020 respectively according to the Fed's latest Summary of Economic Projections. The Core PCE YoY (Chair Powell's preferred inflation measure) is at 1.6%. Some at the Fed have noted that the Core PCE reading has been below 2.0% for the past seven years (with the exception of a few months in 2018).

This chart relates to the price stability mandate

Market-based Inflation Expectations

10-year “breakeven” refers to the inflation rate implied by 10 year Treasury Inflation Protected Securities (TIPS)



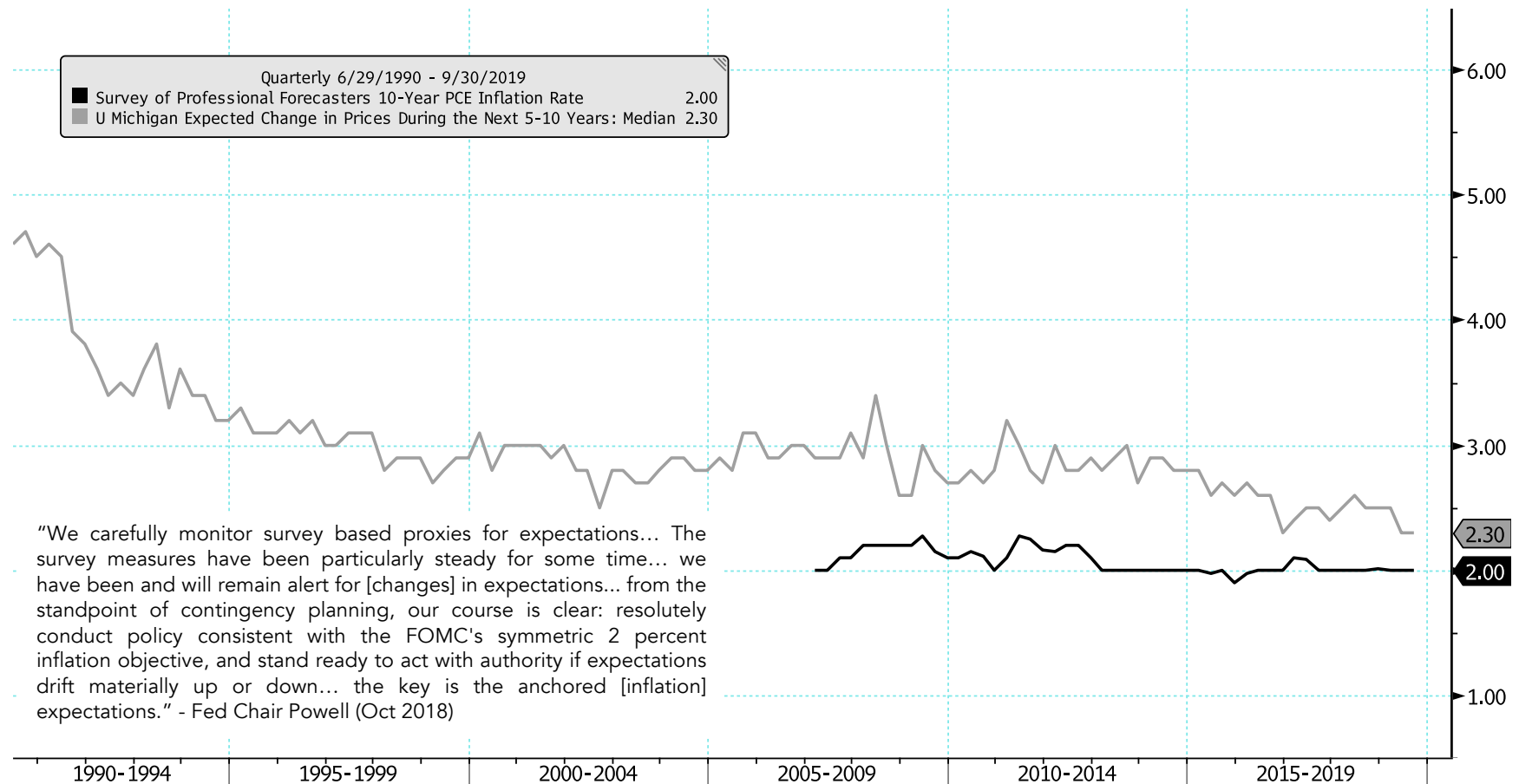
Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: Market based inflation expectations have ticked up recently but remain at relatively low levels. The market is suggesting average annual inflation over the next 10 years might be around 1.7%, based on the TIPS. This inflation expectation is calculated by subtracting the 10yr TIPS yield (real rate) from the 10yr US Treasury yield (nominal rate). This is considered a market-based measure, the Fed also looks at other market-based measures as well as survey-based measures. In my view market based inflation expectations have fallen over the past year in large part due to the decline in oil prices.

This chart relates to the price stability mandate

Survey-based Inflation Expectations

University of Michigan Consumer Inflation Expectations and Survey of Professional Forecasters Expectations



Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: The University of Michigan inflation expectations survey reading is currently near all time lows. Powell is particularly focused on the role of anchored inflation expectations in terms of meeting the Fed's price stability mandate over the medium term. Based on a speech and presentation given in October 2018, it appears he watches the above survey based indicators to monitor for material changes.

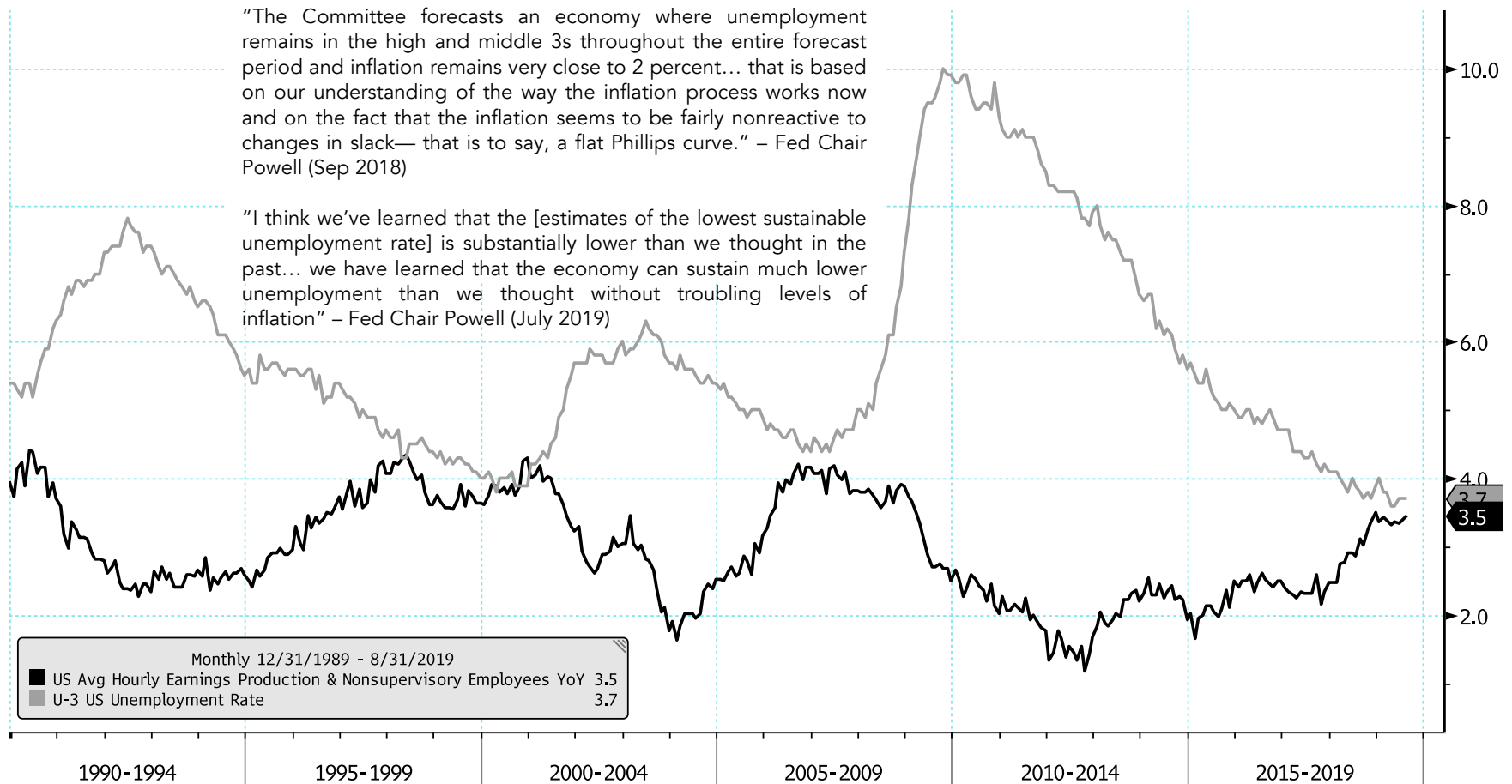
This chart relates to the price stability mandate

Unemployment Rate and Wages

The relationship between the unemployment rate and wages is referred to as the “Phillips Curve”

“The Committee forecasts an economy where unemployment remains in the high and middle 3s throughout the entire forecast period and inflation remains very close to 2 percent... that is based on our understanding of the way the inflation process works now and on the fact that the inflation seems to be fairly nonreactive to changes in slack— that is to say, a flat Phillips curve.” – Fed Chair Powell (Sep 2018)

“I think we’ve learned that the [estimates of the lowest sustainable unemployment rate] is substantially lower than we thought in the past... we have learned that the economy can sustain much lower unemployment than we thought without troubling levels of inflation” – Fed Chair Powell (July 2019)



Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

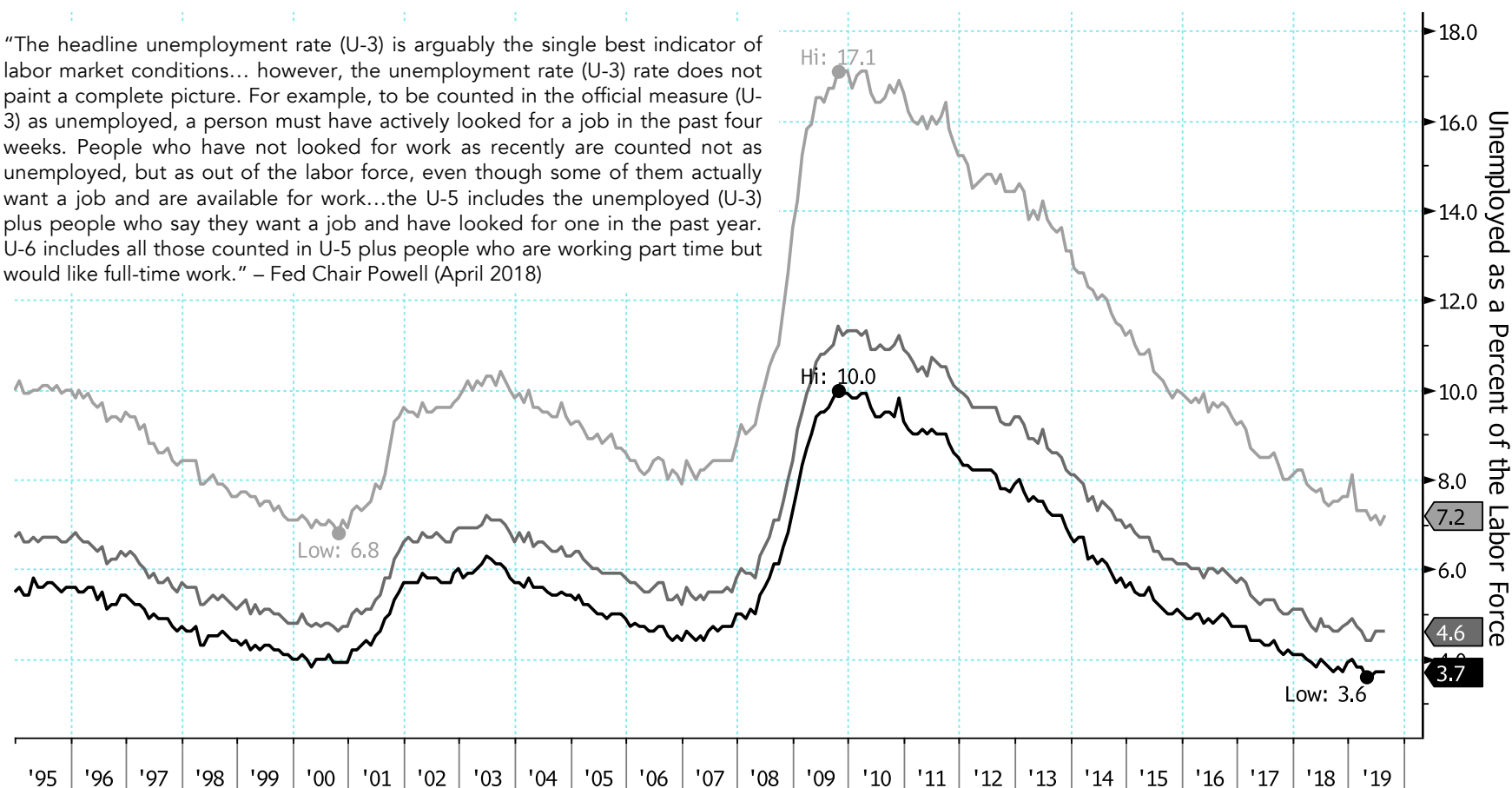
Analysis: Fed policy makers have been surprised by the lack of wage inflation (and general inflation) in recent years. I think in Powell's mind that suggests the labor market might not be at maximum employment yet.

This chart relates to both the price stability mandate and the maximum employment mandate

Unemployment Rate Measures

U-3, U-5, U-6 Unemployment Rates

"The headline unemployment rate (U-3) is arguably the single best indicator of labor market conditions... however, the unemployment rate (U-3) rate does not paint a complete picture. For example, to be counted in the official measure (U-3) as unemployed, a person must have actively looked for a job in the past four weeks. People who have not looked for work as recently are counted not as unemployed, but as out of the labor force, even though some of them actually want a job and are available for work...the U-5 includes the unemployed (U-3) plus people who say they want a job and have looked for one in the past year. U-6 includes all those counted in U-5 plus people who are working part time but would like full-time work." – Fed Chair Powell (April 2018)



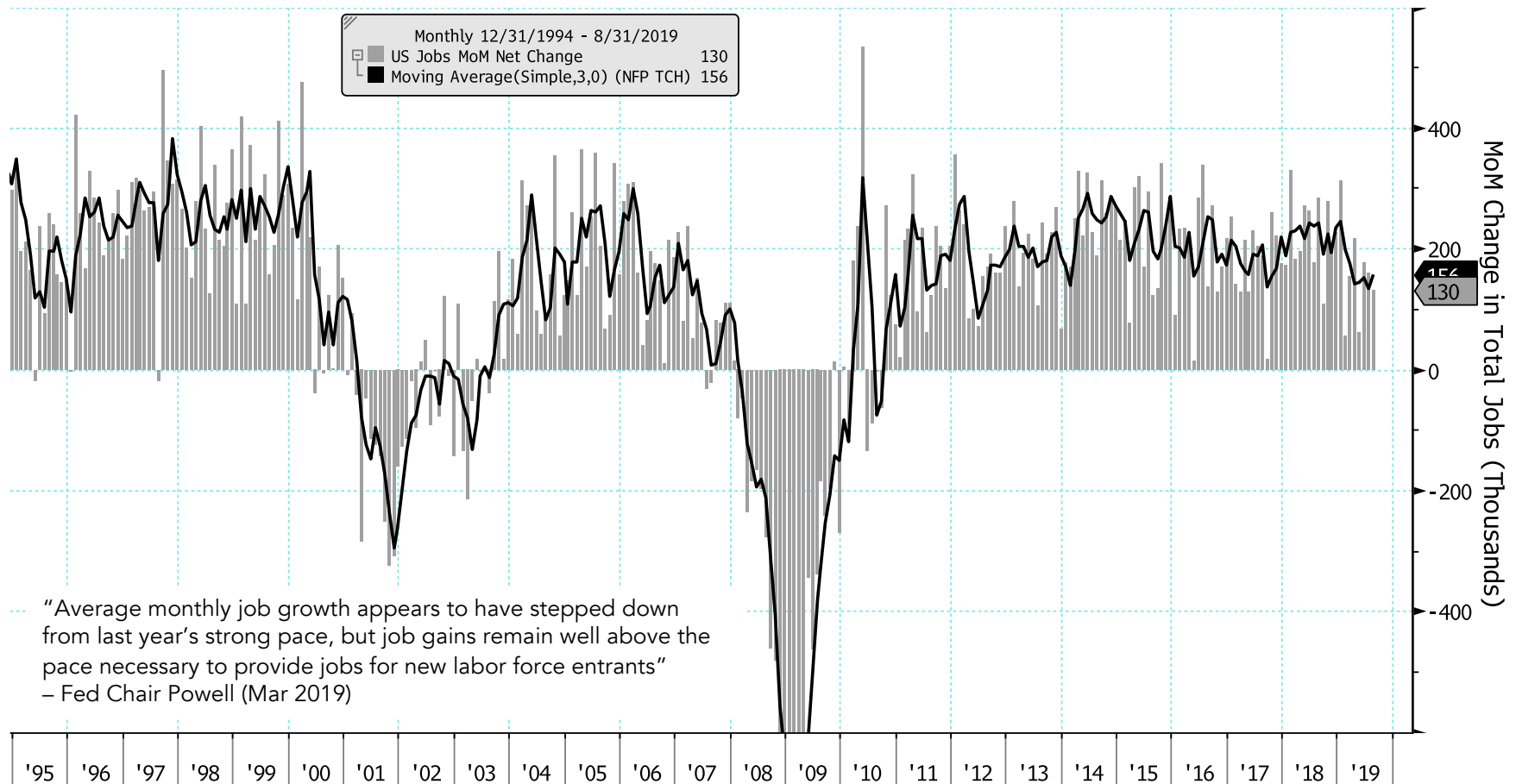
Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: The U-3 rate remained stable at 3.7% (on the back of an uptick in labor force participation- a healthy sign for the economy).

This chart relates to the maximum employment mandate

Job Gains

The Net Monthly Change in Non-farm Payrolls (grey) with 3-month Moving Average (black)



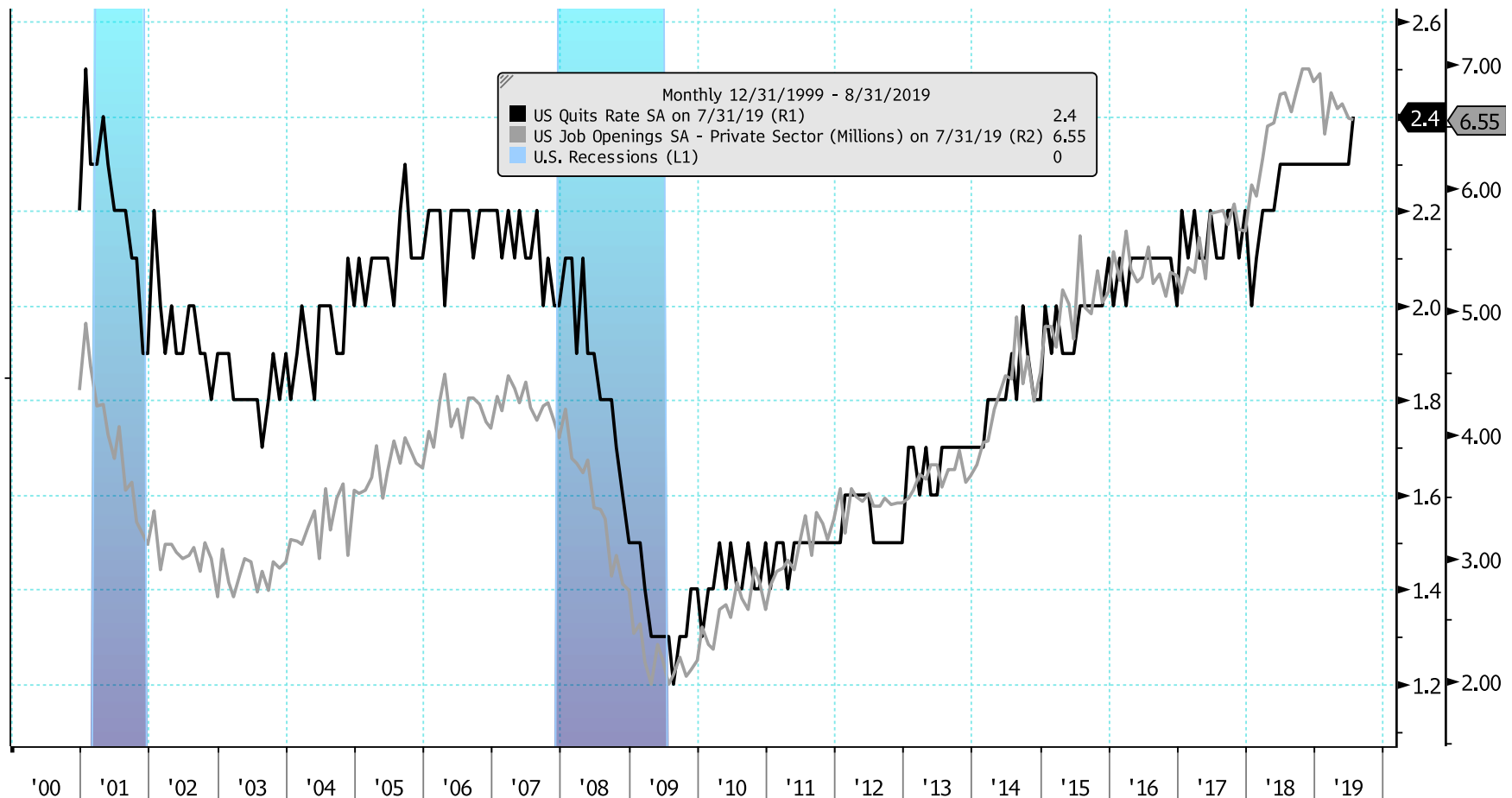
Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: The 3-month moving average of the net change in non-farm payrolls is 156k, likely above the pace needed to provide jobs to new entrants into the labor force. This picture currently indicates a healthy labor market; however, there has been a down trend of the 3m MA over the past year.

This chart relates to the maximum employment mandate

Jobs Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS)

Jobs Openings (millions) and Quits Rate (percent)



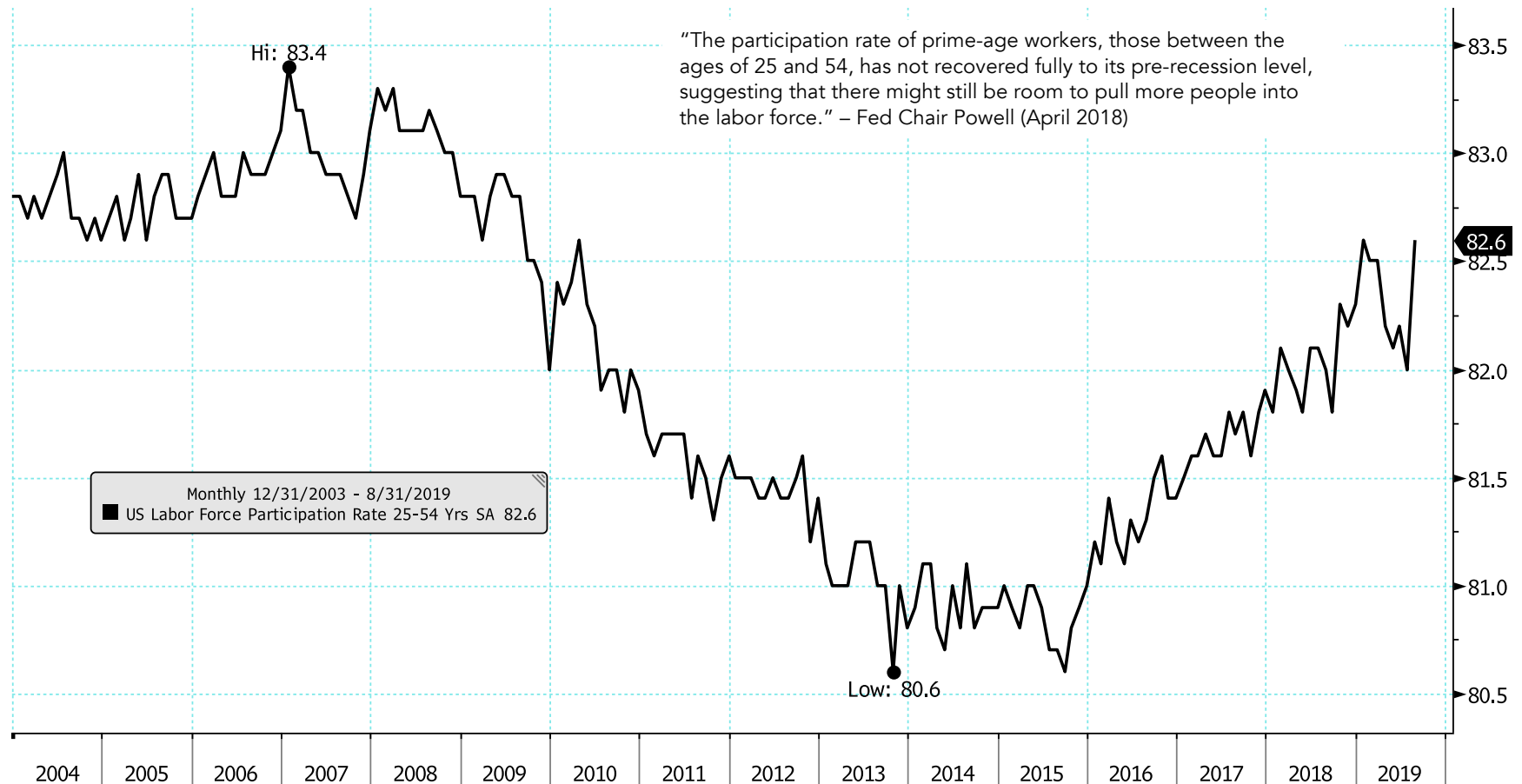
Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: Former Fed Chair Yellen was an advocate of looking at the JOLTS report for guidance on the labor market. For the time being the JOLTS report looks somewhat mixed, with the job openings numbers coming off of their peak from last year, but with a rising quits rate (now at a new cycle high).

This chart relates to the maximum employment mandate

Prime-age (25-54) Labor Force Participation Rate

The labor force is the percent of the population that is either working or actively looking for work, in this case between the ages of 25-54



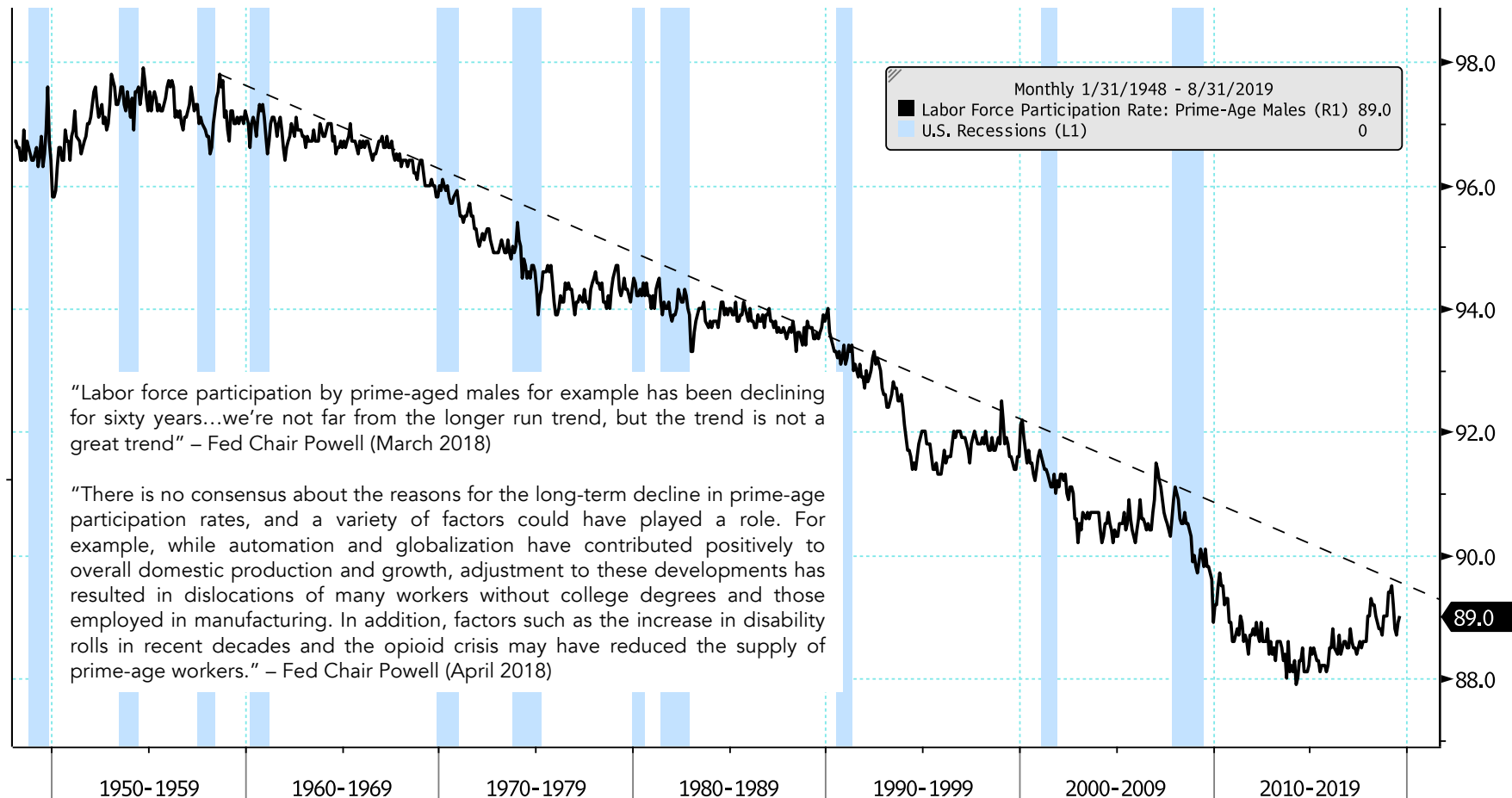
Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: The prime-age participation rate is below the previous cycle high, although is generally trending higher. I think in Powell's mind this picture suggests the labor market might not be at maximum employment yet.

This chart relates to the maximum employment mandate

Prime-age (25-54) Male Labor Force Participation Rate

The labor force is the percent of the population that is either working or actively looking for work, in this case males between the ages of 25-54



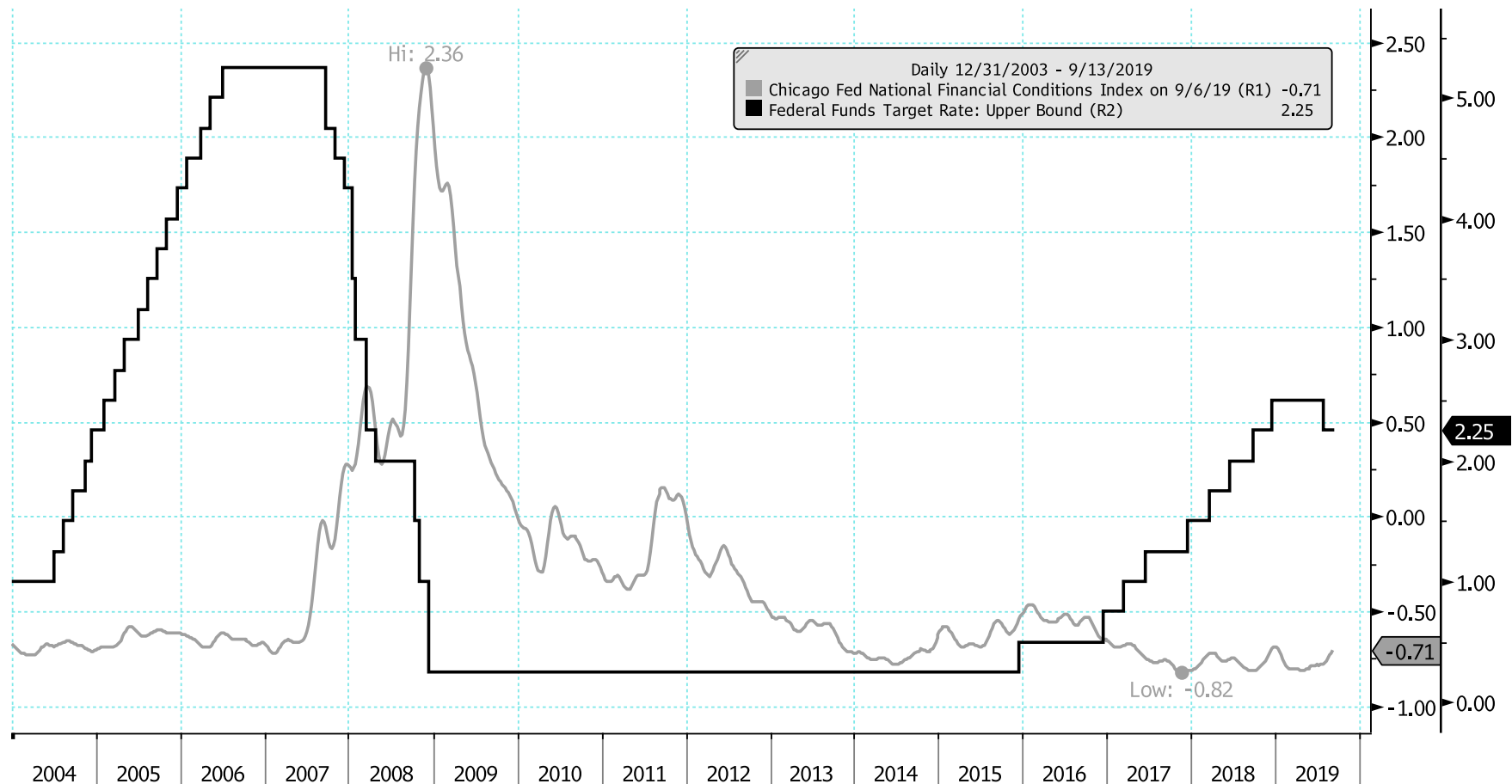
Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: A prime-age male labor force participation rate above the dotted line might represent a labor market that is close to maximum employment in Powell's framework. The latest data point shows a slight uptick.

This chart relates to the maximum employment mandate

Fed Funds Rate and Financial Conditions

Chicago Fed National Financial Conditions Index and the Fed Funds Rate

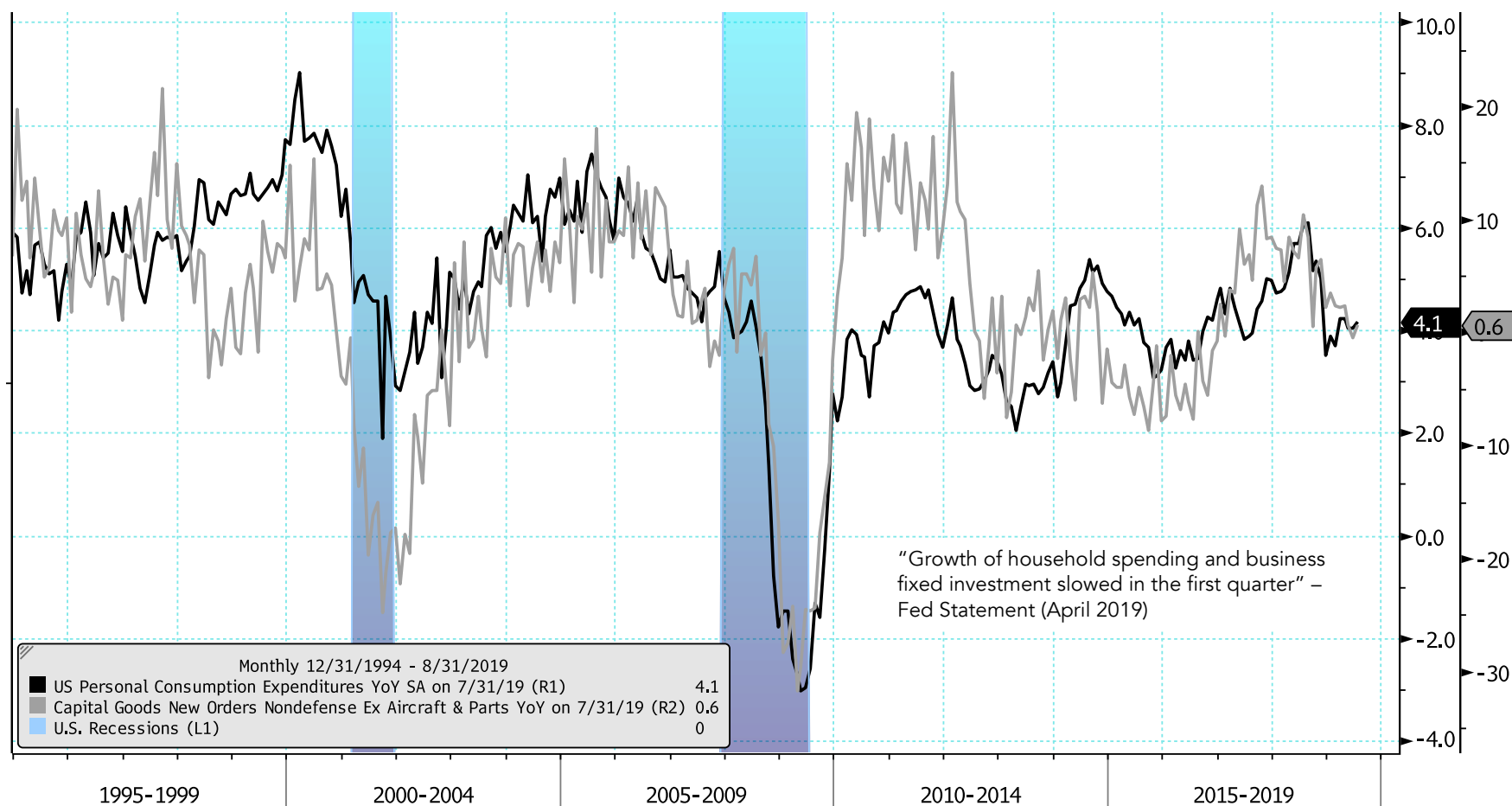


Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: The financial conditions index has been rising over the past few months (suggesting tighter financial conditions), but remains at a relatively loose level overall. Financial stability, which can be measured by financial conditions, is sometimes thought of as an implicit third mandate of the Fed. Fed hikes so far have had little impact on financial conditions as measured by this index, although Fed officials have historically commented that monetary policy acts with a lag (some estimates suggest an 18 month lag).

Household Spending and Business Fixed Investment

U.S. Personal Consumption expenditures (black) and U.S. Capital Goods New Orders (grey)

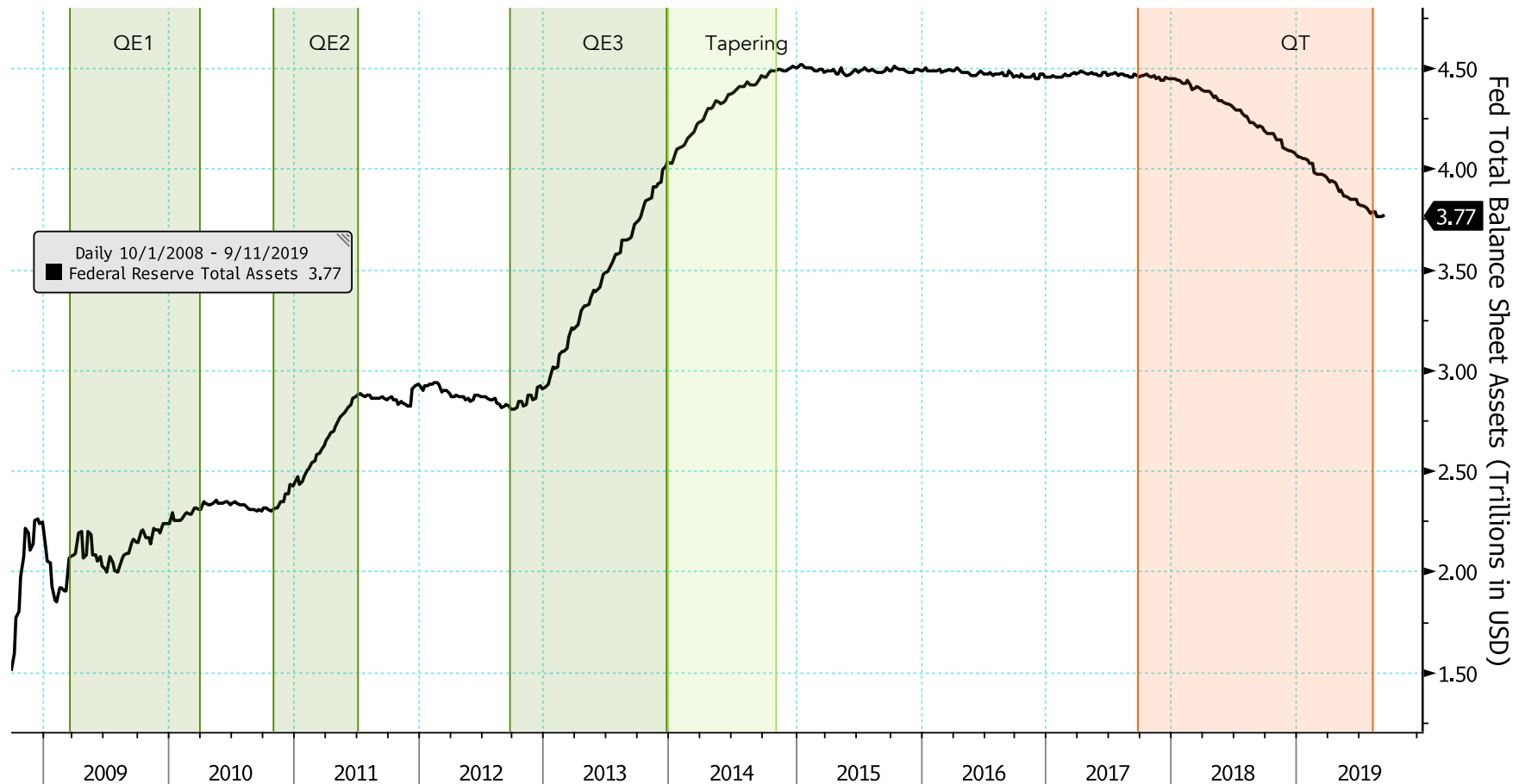


Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: Powell has commented more frequently recently about the slowdown in both household spending and business investment, which is illustrated in the above chart.

Fed Balance Sheet

Federal Reserve Balance Sheet Total Assets and QE/QT Operation Phases

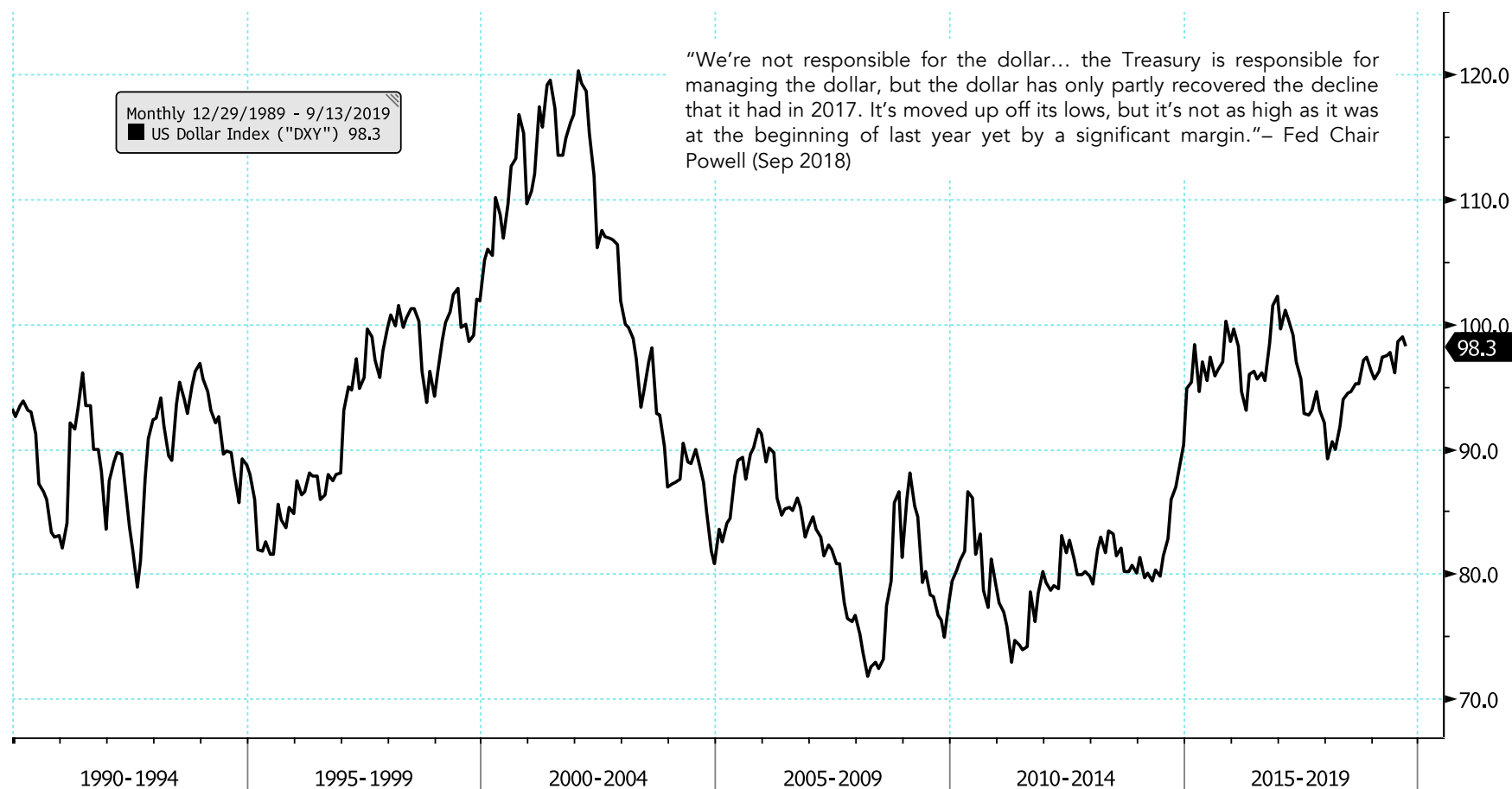


Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: Balance sheet run-off ("Quantitative Tightening (QT)") ended in August 2019. Some high ranking Fed officials have suggested that the Fed will want to leave about 1 trillion in excess reserves (as a "liquidity overhang" in the banking system), currently excess reserves are around 1.3 trillion.

U.S. Dollar

Dollar Index ("DXY")

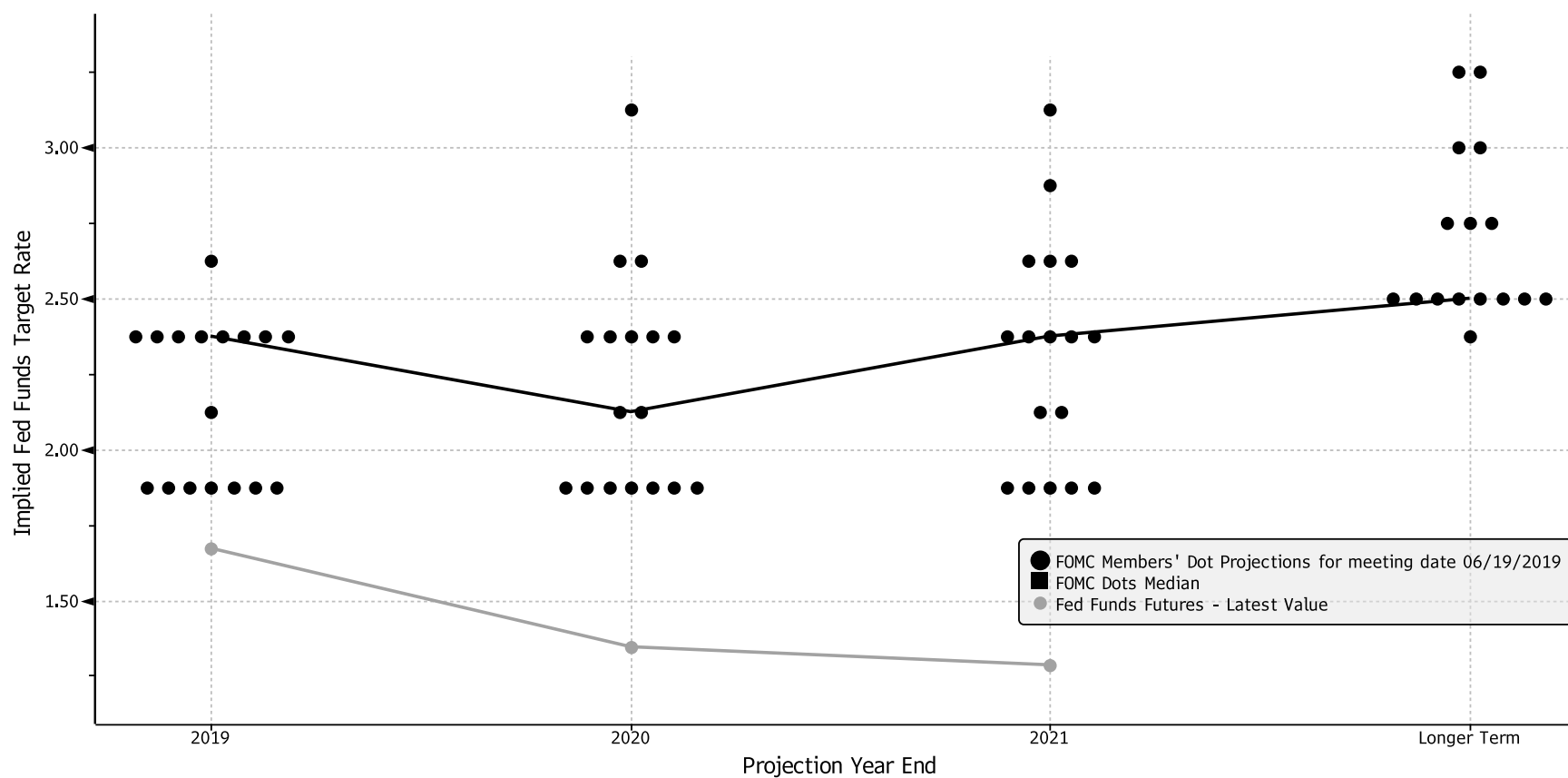


Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: Powell does not seem to be concerned about the value of the dollar currently, which is still below its multi year highs.

Fed "Dot Plot"

FOMC participants' assessments of appropriate monetary policy from June 2019 Meeting (black), and Fed Funds Futures (grey)



Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: The dots represent FOMC participants' assessments of appropriate monetary policy. The market pricing, represented by the Fed Funds Futures (grey line) is substantially below the median dots for year end 2019 and 2020, and reflects the expectation for rate cuts. The Fed shifted their dots lower at the June meeting.

Fed Median Economic Projections: June 2019

FOMC participants' economic projections are under their individual assessments of projected appropriate monetary policy

Variable	2019	2020	2021	Longer run
Change in Real GDP	2.1%	2.0%	1.8%	1.9%
Unemployment Rate	3.6%	3.7%	3.8%	4.2%
PCE Inflation	1.5%	1.9%	2.0%	2.0%
Core PCE Inflation	1.8%	1.9%	2.0%	N/A
Fed Funds Rate	2.4%	2.1%	2.4%	2.5%

Source: Federal Reserve, © Merk Investments LLC

Analysis: Compared to the March meeting, the median projections shifted lower for growth, inflation, and the fed funds rate path.

The above economic projections of Federal Reserve Board members and Federal Reserve Bank presidents are made under their individual assessments of projected appropriate monetary policy, which are represented in the previous dot chart.

The longer run inflation expectation is 2.0%, the longer run Fed Funds rate projection is 2.5%, which represents the Fed's best guess of the natural rate of interest. The natural rate can be disaggregated into a natural real rate (i.e., net of inflation) and an inflation rate. The Fed's longer run inflation projection is 2.0% which suggests they view the natural real rate of interest around 0.5%, which is roughly consistent with NY Fed President Williams' academic work on estimating the natural real rate of interest.

The longer run unemployment rate projection is 4.2%, which is the Fed's best guess of the natural unemployment rate. At the current rate of 3.7% there is some chance that the economy is operating above capacity; however, Powell has acknowledged that past estimates of the natural rate of unemployment have been too high, and may still be too high.

Who's Who at the Fed

Category	Name	Role	Status	Dove-Hawk Scale*
Board of Governors	Jerome Powell	Chair	Voter	Neutral
Board of Governors	Richard Clarida	Vice Chair	Voter	Neutral
Board of Governors	Lael Brainard	Governor	Voter	Neutral/Dovish
Board of Governors	Randal Quarles	Governor	Voter	Neutral
Board of Governors	Michelle Bowman	Governor	Voter	Neutral/Hawkish
Board of Governors	[Judy Shelton (nominee)]	Governor	[Voter]	
Board of Governors	[Christopher Waller (nominee)]	Governor	[Voter]	
Regional President	John Williams	New York Fed President	Voter	Neutral/Hawkish
Regional President	Eric Rosengren	Boston Fed President	Voter	Neutral/Hawkish
Regional President	Patrick Harker	Philadelphia Fed President		Neutral
Regional President	Loretta Mester	Cleveland Fed President		Neutral/Hawkish
Regional President	Thomas Barkin	Richmond Fed President		Neutral/Hawkish
Regional President	Raphael Bostic	Atlanta Fed President		Neutral/Dovish
Regional President	Charles Evans	Chicago Fed President	Voter	Neutral/Dovish
Regional President	James Bullard	St. Louis Fed President	Voter	Dovish
Regional President	Neel Kashkari	Minneapolis Fed President		Dovish
Regional President	Esther George	Kansas City Fed President	Voter	Hawkish
Regional President	Robert Kaplan	Dallas Fed President		Neutral/Hawkish
Regional President	Mary Daly	San Francisco Fed President		Neutral/Dovish

Source: © Merk Investments, Bloomberg

Analysis: All board members vote. The NY Fed President always votes, and then four rotating regional presidents vote. There are two vacancies on the board. The 2020 regional president voters will be Williams, Mester, Harker, Kaplan, and Kashkari.

**The dove-hawk scale relates to the views on appropriate monetary policy: with hawks likely representing the upper end of the spectrum on the dot plot and the doves likely representing the lower end of the spectrum.*

Conclusion/Thoughts

It is widely expected by market participants and economists that the Fed will cut rates again at the September meeting, most likely a 25 bp cut with the potential to cut another 25 bps before the end of the year. As of writing, market pricing is suggesting a 95% chance of a 25 bp cut and a 5% chance of a no change at the Sep 18th meeting.

In addition to an announcement on a rate cut, the market will be focused on the updated Summary of Economic Projections, where Fed officials update the forecasts on growth and inflation, as well as the expected path for the Fed funds rate. Market participants will also look for language changes in the statement and for commentary from Chair Powell's post meeting press conference and Q&A.

The likely rate cut comes with the backdrop of a Fed focused on weak inflation, softening economic data, heightened global uncertainty (increased downside risks), concerns over an inverted yield curve, and a desire to continue the economic expansion. There may be hawkish dissenting votes from Esther George and/or Eric Rosengren.

With regards to the yield curve, a 25 basis point cut may now be enough to uninvert the curve (10yr - Fed funds rate) given that the 10yr yield is currently around 1.90% (as of writing) and a 25bp cut would bring the effective Fed funds rate to around 1.88%.

It may be worth noting that while the last Fed hiking cycle (from 2004 to 2006) was a constant move higher in rates, historically it is not uncommon for hiking cycles to have periodic phases of rate cuts. For example the Fed cut rates three times in 1998, and then resumed hikes to the rate cycle peak in 2000. Former Fed Chair Greenspan reversed course many times, cutting rates only to hike them again later in the cycle in 1987, 1995, and 1998.

-Nick Reece, CFA

About the Author



Nick Reece, CFA: Nick is a Senior Analyst and Portfolio Manager at Merk Investments. He focuses on macroeconomic research and private wealth management, regularly publishing reports on the U.S. business cycle and equity market. Prior to joining Merk in 2012, Nick gained experience working on capital markets deals with Paul Hastings in Hong Kong, and with Atlantis Investment Management. Mr. Reece holds a B.A. in Economics from Trinity College and is a Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) charterholder. Nick lives in New York City. Outside of work, he is an avid reader and volunteer high school math tutor. You can follow Nick on Twitter @nicholastreece.

Disclosure

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