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2024 Outlook Theme #2: It Did Not Take Long to See the Duration Benefit of Higher Bond Yields

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We noted in our *9/30/23 Focal Point: Buried Bonds Can Come Back to Life* that "despite recent poor performance, there is reason to be optimistic about Fixed Income: risk adjusted potential looks better… the recent period of rising rates has been bad for Fixed Income investors who invested three years ago, but it sets the table for a better environment going forward. Facing continued uncertainty and volatility in the economy, it would be helpful if *Buried Bonds Can Come Back to Life*, and return to their historic role of providing income, diversification, and risk reduction to investor portfolios."

The record 7% jump for the Agg, highlighted in the prior section, was not exactly what we had in mind, but it shows how a reasonable yield relative to duration can set the table for better performance from Fixed Income. Duration measures the sensitivity of a bond's price to changes in interest rates, with the value representing the percent change in a bond's price for a 1% change in rates. For example, a bond with a duration of five would lose 5% if interest rates rose 1%.

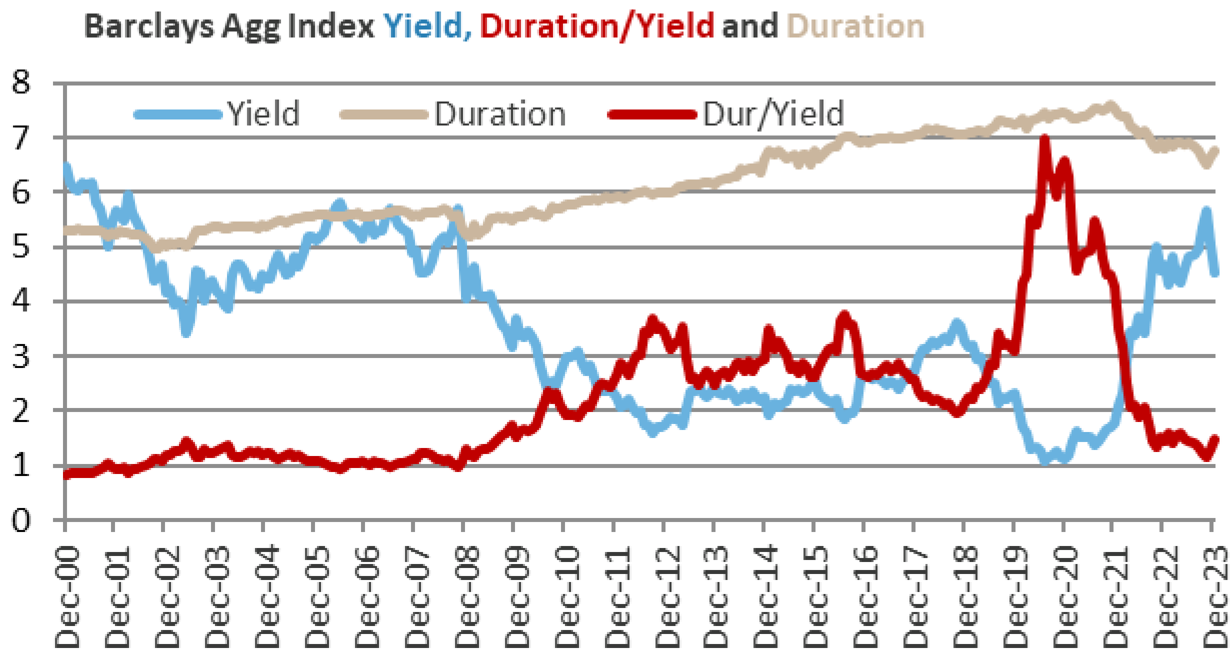

Chart 1

Chart 1 above shows the yield, duration and ratio of duration to yield of the Agg back to 2000. Why would this matter to an investor? If yield is what you can earn in a year, and duration is the sensitivity of price to a 1% change in yield, then duration to yield is the number of years it would take to earn back the loss in value from a 1% increase in rates.

By the end of 2020, Aggressive Fed action to counteract the Covid pandemic, paired with investor fear of a global recession, combined to push the yield on the Agg down to 1%, and the duration/yield ratio jumped from 3 to 7. This meant that by the end of 2020, it would have taken 7 years of that 1% yield to offset the potential loss of just a 1% rise in interest rates. This is, of course, the reading right before the poor bond period of 2021-2023. A historically high duration/yield clearly preceded the historically poor 3 year period of returns.

Moving to the end of Q3'23, the yield had jumped to 5% and the duration is down to about 6.5, putting the duration/yield ratio at 1.2, and the best level since before 2010. This set the stage for Q4's bond market rally. Even today, at the end of Q4'23, and with the Agg yield down to 4.5% from 5.4%, the 1.5 duration/yield ratio suggests bonds are reasonably priced, and at least have the potential to offer some portfolio diversification.

However, it's not perfect: strong economic growth or stubborn inflation could push rates higher with, for example, the 10yr Treasury heading back towards 5% from 3.88%. A similar 1% move in the Agg's yield would, based on its duration of 6.5, suggest there is price downside risk of about 6%. But the 4.5% yield would allow income to balance that and minimize losses to about breakeven (over a year, to collect that yield) in such a scenario. Should economic growth come up short, rates would decline, and investors would receive some price appreciation to go along with the yield.

It Did Not Take Long to See the Duration Benefit of Higher Bond Yields. Due to Q4'23's major move in the bond market, Fixed Income's outlook is not ideal for all scenarios. But it does still offer decent diversification potential to a portfolio.

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-The Standard & Poor's 500 is a market capitalization weighted index of 500 widely held domestic stocks often used as a proxy for the U.S. stock market. The Standard & Poor's 400 is a market capitalization weighted index of 400 mid cap domestic stocks. The Standard & Poor's 600 is a market capitalization weighted index of 600 small cap domestic stocks.

-The NASDAQ Composite Index measures the performance of all issues listed in the NASDAQ stock market, except for rights, warrants, units, and convertible debentures.

-The MSCI EAFE Index (Europe, Australasia, Far East) is a free float-adjusted market capitalization index that is designed to measure the equity market performance of developed markets, excluding the US & Canada. The MSCI Emerging Markets Index is a free float-adjusted market capitalization index that is designed to measure equity market performance of 21 emerging markets. The MSCI All Country World Index is a free float adjusted market capitalization index designed to measure the performance of large and mid and cap stocks in 23 developed markets and 24 emerging markets. With over 2,800 constituents it represents over 85% of the global equity market.

-The Barlcays Aggregate Index represents the total return performance (price change and income) of the US bond market, including Government, Agency, Mortgage and Corporate debt.

-The BofA Merrill Lynch Investment Grade and High Yield Indices are compiled by Bank of America / Merrill Lynch from the TRACE bond pricing service and intended to represent the total return performance (price change and income) of investment grade and high yield bonds.

-The S&P/LSTA U.S. Leveraged Loan 100 is designed to reflect the largest facilities in the leveraged loan market. It mirrors the market-weighted performance of the largest institutional leveraged loans based upon market weightings, spreads and interest payments.

-The S&P Municipal Bond Index is a broad, comprehensive, market value-weighted index. The S&P Municipal Bond Index constituents undergo a monthly review and rebalancing, in order to ensure that the Index remains current, while avoiding excessive turnover. The Index is rules based, although the Index Committee reserves the right to exercise discretion, when necessary.

-The BofA Merrill Lynch US Emerging Markets External Sovereign Index tracks the performance of US dollar emerging markets sovereign debt publicly issued in the US and eurobond markets.

-The HFRI Fund of Funds index is compiled by the Hedge Funds Research Institute and is intended to represent the total return performance of the entire hedge fund universe.