The Case for Gradual but Regular Monetary Policy Normalization

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March Rate Increase by FOMC

- The committee had previously increased the interest rate target range just twice in this tightening cycle – in December 2015 and in December 2016

- Term “gradual” is not synonymous with once a year just before Christmas

- I view four increases this year as fully consistent with comments from FOMC participants stating that the path of normalizing rates will be gradual

- Clearly slower than the previous tightening cycle that began in June of 2004
The Default Should Be Gradual Normalization

- An increase at *every other* FOMC meeting over the course of this year could and should be the committee’s default
- At present, the perception seems to be that the outcome of each meeting depends on nuances of each incoming data release (with the base case being no change in rates)
- A somewhat different stance for policy: expect to tighten at every other meeting unless incoming data are materially inconsistent with the forecast
- This would still be fully data-dependent, not a preset path, as it would hinge on incoming data
Why a Gradual but More Regular Move to Normalization is Now Appropriate

- Improved “starting” conditions – near both elements of the Fed’s dual mandate

- Still have a federal funds rate that is less than 1 percent, while inflation is approaching 2 percent

- It *is* unusual to still have negative real interest rates late in a recovery when the economy is close to full employment and nearing the inflation target
Figure 1: Real Federal Funds Effective Rate
January 1970 - February 2017

Note: The real federal funds effective rate is calculated by subtracting the core PCE inflation rate from the nominal federal funds effective rate. A core PCE inflation rate of 1.7% is assumed for February.

Source: Federal Reserve Board, BEA, NBER, Haver Analytics
Figure 2: Real Federal Funds Effective Rate
January 1970 - February 2017

Note: The real federal funds effective rate is calculated by subtracting the core PCE inflation rate from the nominal federal funds effective rate. A core PCE inflation rate of 1.7% is assumed for February.

Source: Federal Reserve Board, BEA, NBER, Haver Analytics
Figure 3: Real GDP Growth
1970:Q1 - 2016:Q4

Note: Real GDP growth is displayed on a year-over-year basis to smooth the series. The average growth over recovery is calculated as the average annual growth in real GDP from the previous trough to the peak.

Source: BEA, NBER, Haver Analytics
Figure 4: Inflation Rate: Change in Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Price Index
January 1970 - January 2017

Source: BEA, NBER, Haver Analytics
Figure 5: Survey of Professional Forecasters: Median Inflation Rate Forecast

Forecast as of February 10, 2017

Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, Survey of Professional Forecasters; Haver Analytics
Figure 6: Real GDP Growth: Actual and Forecast

2016:Q1 - 2017:Q4

Quarterly Percent Change at Annual Rate

Actual

Survey of Professional Forecasts Median

Forecast as of February 10, 2017

Source: BEA; Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, Survey of Professional Forecasters; Haver Analytics
Figure 7: Survey of Professional Forecasters: Median Civilian Unemployment Rate Forecast
2017:Q1 - 2018:Q1

Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, Survey of Professional Forecasters; Haver Analytics
Projections for the unemployment rate are for the average civilian unemployment rate in the fourth quarter of the year indicated. Longer-run projections represent each participant’s assessment of the rate to which the unemployment rate would be expected to converge under appropriate monetary policy and in the absence of further shocks to the economy.

Forecast as of March 15, 2017

Source: FOMC, Summary of Economic Projections (SEP)
Figure 9: Civilian Unemployment Rate by State
February 2017

Source: BLS, Haver Analytics
Figure 10: Civilian Unemployment Rate by State
February 2017

Note: The 20-year average is calculated using the most recent 240 months, March 1997 through February 2017.
Source: BLS, Haver Analytics
Figure 11: Wage Growth for Private Industry Workers and for Selected Industries
January 2012 - February 2017

Percent Change from Year Earlier

- All Private Industries
- Construction
- Professional and Business Services

Note: Wage growth is calculated as the change in average hourly earnings.
Source: BLS, Haver Analytics
Figure 12: S&P 500 Composite Price to Operating Earnings Ratio
January 1990 - February 2017

Source: S&P, NBER, Haver Analytics
Figure 13: High-Yield Corporate Bond Spread over 10-Year U.S. Treasury Yield
January 1995 - February 2017

Source: BofA Merrill Lynch, NBER, Haver Analytics
Figure 14: Apartment Capitalization Rate
2001:Q1 - 2016:Q4

Note: The capitalization or “cap” rate is the ratio of net operating income produced by a property to the price paid for the property, calculated at the time of a transaction. Based on properties of $2.5 million or more.

Source: Real Capital Analytics, NBER, Haver Analytics
Concluding Observations

- Recent economic reports have been consistent with continued steady improvement in the economy
  - Payroll employment growing: by 235,000 in most recent jobs report
  - The unemployment rate declining: by 0.1 percentage points, to 4.7 percent (my estimate of full employment)
  - Increase in average hourly earnings of 2.8 percent
- Forecasters expect achievement of the 2 percent inflation target this year
Concluding Observations (Continued)

- I believe it is likely to be appropriate for the FOMC to raise rates at a *more regular* – though *still gradual* – pace

- I consider it appropriate to move the nominal rate – gradually but more regularly – so the real rate becomes less negative

- It is important to avoid creating an over-hot economy that could require a more rapid tightening of monetary policy – which would place at risk the economic improvements seen to date