Credit



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High Grade
North America

# **US High Grade Strategy Flash**

### **Bruise clues**

- The direction of causality from credit markets into the economy means that credit investors cannot wait for economic data to roll over before demanding more attractive investment terms.
- We go clue-spotting for cycle turns and come away wanting to sell high-grade US credit risk into pockets of market strength.
- Credit risk premia in US IG appear too low considering the extreme business debt overhang. If a growth slowdown is coming, spreads will need to widen to induce a suitably robust Fed response.

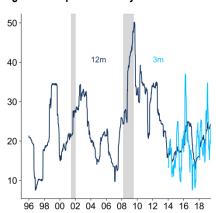
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#### Figure 1. IG spread volatility



Source: Citi Research; Note: log difference of weekly spreads, annualized vols

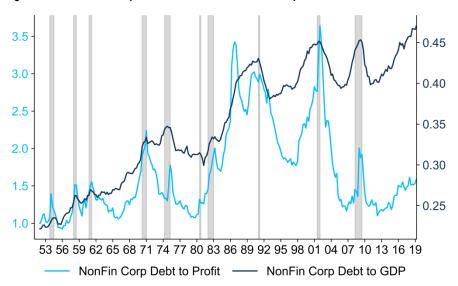
## **Bruise clues**

Credit markets aren't merely spectators in the economic cycle. When lenders raise the cost and reduce the availability of firms' financing, businesses pull back on investment and employment, and asset price declines spill over in often dramatic and unpredictable ways. This chain of causality from credit to the economy means, in practical terms, that credit investors cannot wait for economic data to roll over before demanding more attractive investment terms.

Instead, to avoid black eyes, credit investors must consider both the likelihood and severity of near-term economic shocks as well as the degree of vulnerability among issuers and price this well in advance. This anticipatory process imbues spreads with important predictive power and appears to be working as intended (for example, the December 2018 credit tantrum and Fed pivot). In some sense, the credit markets <u>are</u> the recession risk, and the Fed's dovish pivot is in part intended to disrupt the (very rational) anticipatory anxiety about our over-leveraged markets heading into a growth slowdown. A spike in realized high-grade bond spread volatility suggests to us that credit investors are wavering in their conviction that the Fed is both willing and able to come to the rescue (Figure 1).

Risk premia are too low today in the context of the extreme business debt overhang. If a recession is coming, spreads will widen almost regardless of the Fed's response. (Unlike in Europe, where our strategy colleagues have a more optimistic view on spreads, in the US, direct purchases of corporate bonds are not part of the central bank toolkit.) Reliance on debt means that the effects of the recession may be especially pronounced among non-financial US firms and, by extension, their creditors. US firms have accumulated the highest-ever¹ levels of debt as a share of GDP (Figure 2), a statistic highlighted recently by New York Fed researchers, who balance their assessment by noting the relatively low ratio of debt to profits.

Figure 2. Non-financial corporate debt as a share of GDP and profit



Source: Citi Research; Haver Analytics; Note: shaded areas indicate recessions

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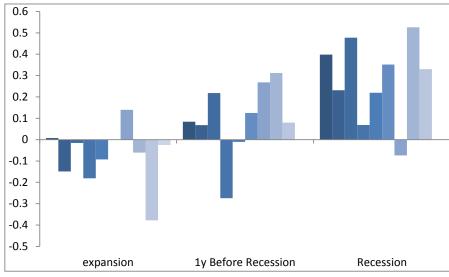
Looking into this same dataset, we instead focus in on changes in trends around the turns in the economic cycle to look for recession markers. The data, which spans ten business cycles over the last 60 years, offers less direct comparability to the US

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> https://libertystreeteconomics.newyorkfed.org/2019/05/is-there-too-much-business-debt.html

IG market, as it includes all forms of debt among all non-financial firms but provides insight into how businesses behaved prior to many more economic turns. Not surprisingly, for example, we find that US businesses see profit growth shift from above to below ten-year averages as they enter the final 12 months of an economic expansion (Figure 3).

Figure 3. YoY changes in corporate debt-to-profit ratios across last ten US business cycles

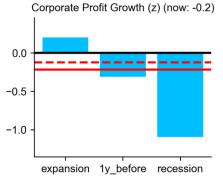


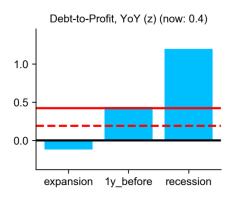
Source: Citi Research

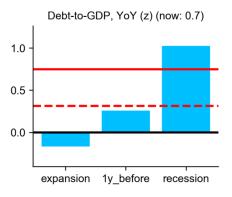
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Similarly, the rate of change in debt-to-profit and debt-to-GDP shifts from below-average during expansions to modestly above-average in the four quarters prior to recession (Figure 4, upper-middle and upper-right panel).

Figure 4. Corporate debt and other metrics over economic expansions, pre-recessions, and recessions (z-scores, ten-year lookback)

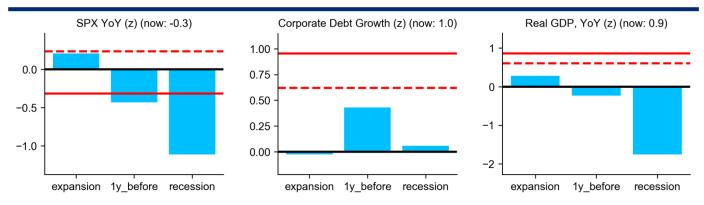






Source: Citi Research

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Source: Citi Research; Haver Analytics; Bloomberg Financial LP; Note: Solid red line indicates Q1 2019; dashed red line indicates Q1 2018.

To normalize data across such an extended historical period, we show growth rates relative to their ten-year averages, with 0 in each chart representing a ten-year average and +1 indicating a growth rate one standard deviation higher than the ten-year averages. Z-scores are averaged across all quarters in each of the three modes of the economic cycles to show summary statistics. In each chart, the most recent reading is shown with a solid red line, while Q1 2018 is shown with a dashed line. In most instances, the trend has moved closer to "turning point" status over over the past year.

- Profit growth has slowed, and the debt-to-profit ratio has increased, in ways that appear similar to prior turning points in the economic cycle.
- The increase in debt to GDP is 0.7 standard deviations higher than the ten-year average, a growth rate akin to recessions.
- S&P 500 12-month returns are below the ten-year average, similar to prior turning points between expansions and recessions.
- Corporate debt growth is off-the-charts high 1 standard deviation higher than the ten-year average. This get-it-while-you-can behavior appears common in the year prior to an economic turn.
- Real GDP growth looks better than fine! Yet as the Fed recognizes this, the causality flows the other direction. This provides little solace to us.

#### Looking ahead

As recessions approach, companies shift their plan from *growing* their way out of debt to *cutting* their way out of debt. The viability of the latter strategy is not supported by historical experience. This could spell trouble for firms across the US high-grade market.

By indicating looser monetary conditions ahead, the Federal Reserve intends to short-circuit, at least partially, the negative feedback loop from credit into the economy. A tilt toward recession, even if softened by central bank policy, could spell trouble for many large high-grade companies that have shorted deleveraging stories to the market and the rating agencies. A spate of large M&A transactions continues to keep rating agencies busy, and we expect downgrade rates to accelerate over the back half of the year.

# **Appendix A-1**

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