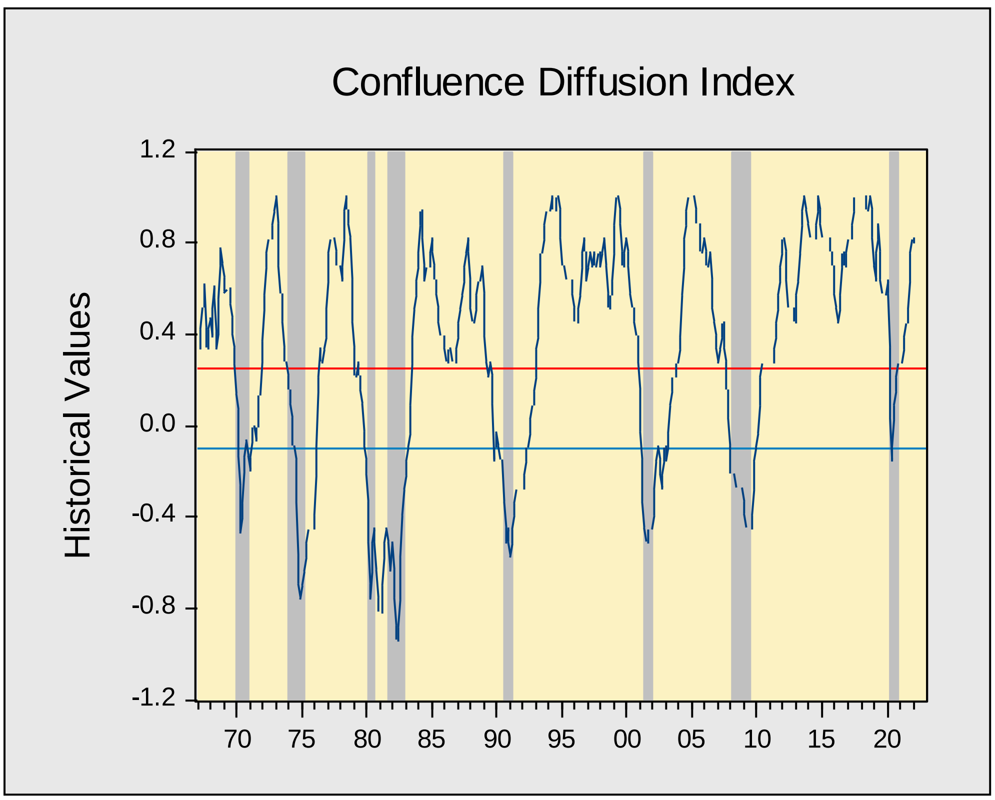
Business Cycle Report

By Thomas Wash

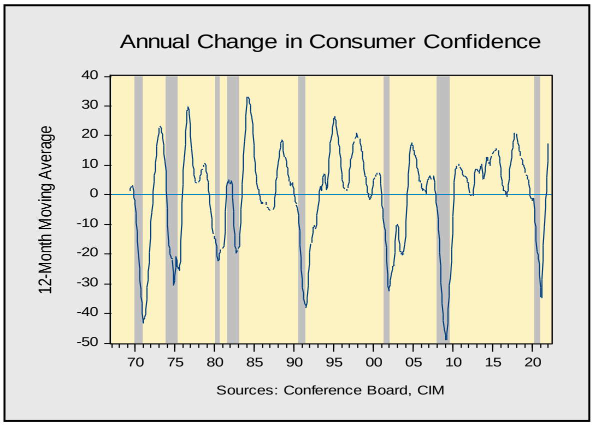
The business cycle has a major impact on financial markets; recessions usually accompany bear markets in equities. The intention of this report is to keep our readers apprised of the potential for recession, updated on a monthly basis. Although it isn't the final word on our views about recession, it is part of our process in signaling the potential for a downturn.

In February, the diffusion index rose further above the recession indicator, signaling that the economy remains in expansion. In financial markets, higher yields on Treasuries have weighed on equities. Meanwhile, manufacturing data suggests that supply chains are improving. Finally, the labor market appears to be strong, with nonfarm payrolls surprising on the upside. That being said, ten out of the 11 indicators are in expansion territory. The diffusion index remained unchanged at +0.8182, remaining well above the recession signal of +0.2500.



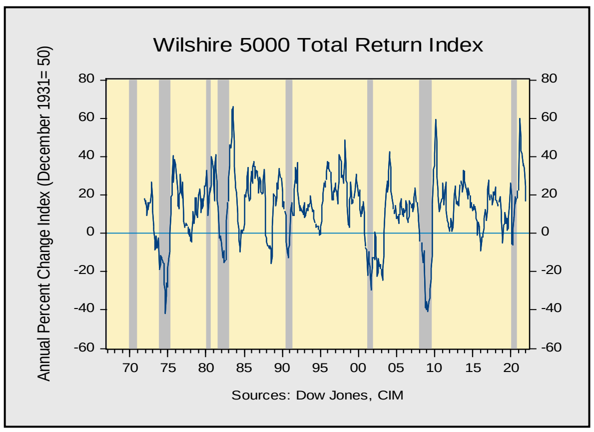
The chart above shows the Confluence Diffusion Index. It uses a three-month moving average of 11 leading indicators to track the state of the business cycle. The red line signals when the business cycle is heading toward a contraction, while the blue line signals when the business cycle is moving toward a recovery. On average, the diffusion index currently provides about six months of lead time for a contraction and five months of lead time for a recovery. Continue reading for a more in-depth understanding of how the indicators are performing and refer to our *Glossary of Charts* at the back of this report for a description of each chart and what it measures. A chart title listed in red indicates that the indicator is signaling recession.

Consumer Confidence



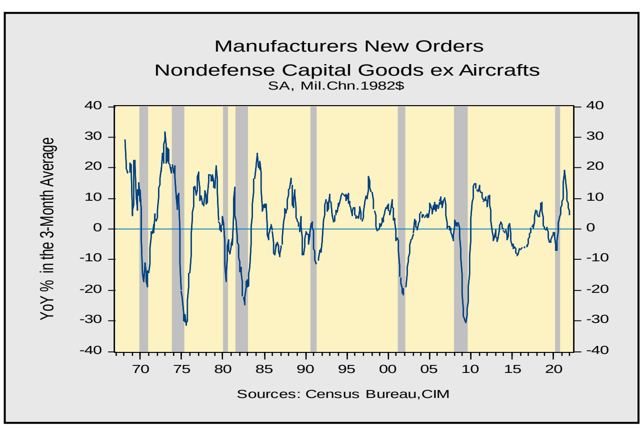
The Consumer Confidence indicator contributed positively to the diffusion index in February. Last month, the rise in the Present Situation Index was offset by a decline in the Consumer Expectations Index. The readings suggest consumers' concerns are turning away from COVID-19 and toward inflation. Although consumers are worried about rising prices, sentiment is relatively high when compared to earlier declines following the emergence of the Delta variant. The latest reading for the Consumer Confidence Index stands at 110.5, down from 111.1 in the previous month and below last year's level of 114.9. The 12-month moving average of the annual change in the index rose from +17.27 to +21.67, as seen on the chart to the left. As a result, the Present Situation Index rose from 144.5 to 145.1. The index for consumers' six-month outlook rose from 88.8 to 87.5.

Wilshire 5000 Index



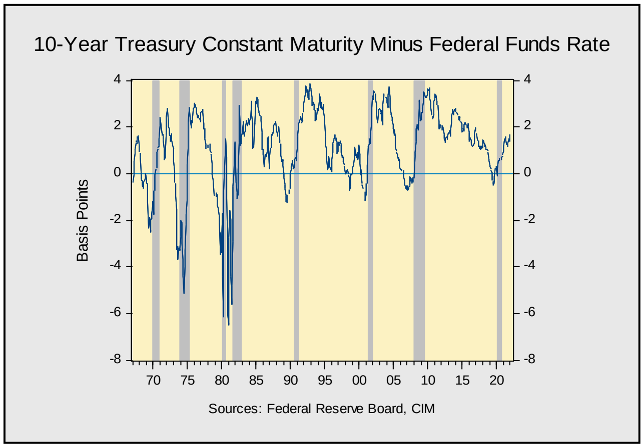
The annual change in the Wilshire 5000 Total Return Index fell for the third consecutive month in February. Last month, the index came in at 215.01, down 3.0% from the prior month. Additionally, the yearly change slowed to 9.6% in February, down from the 16.5% annual change recorded in January. The deceleration in the year-over-year change can be attributed to expectations regarding the Federal Reserve rate increases and escalating tension in Ukraine. Last month, Fed officials reassured markets that it planned to raise in March. Meanwhile, the rising conflict in Ukraine threatens market stability.

Three-Month Average Manufacturers New Orders Nondefense Capital Goods excluding Aircraft



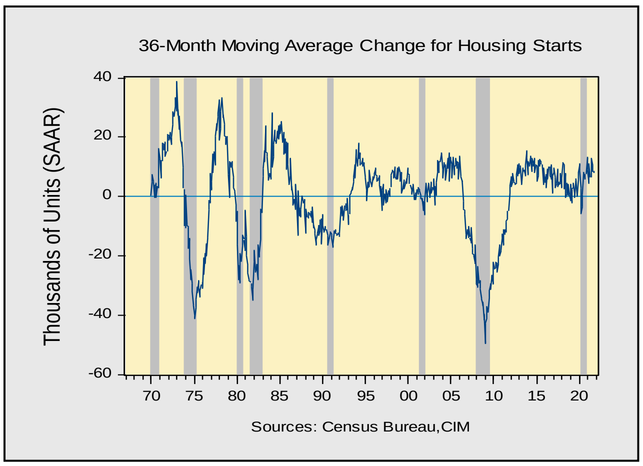
New orders for durable goods, a proxy for business investment, increased in February, according to the Conference Board LEI. The report showed that the value for new orders of durable goods adjusted for inflation rose 0.36% from the previous month. The increase in new orders may be related to firms trying to expand capacity. New orders for nondefense capital goods came in at $41.410B in 1982-chained dollars, which is 4.1% higher than the prior year. The previous month's report was revised lower, from $41.417B to $41.126B. The three-month moving average came in at $41.323B, up from the previous year's value of $41.299B. The indicator, which tracks the annual change in the three-month moving average for new orders, came in at 3.73., lower than the previous month's reading of 4.20 but still well above the recession indicator of 0.

10-Year Treasury Constant Maturity Minus Federal Funds Rate



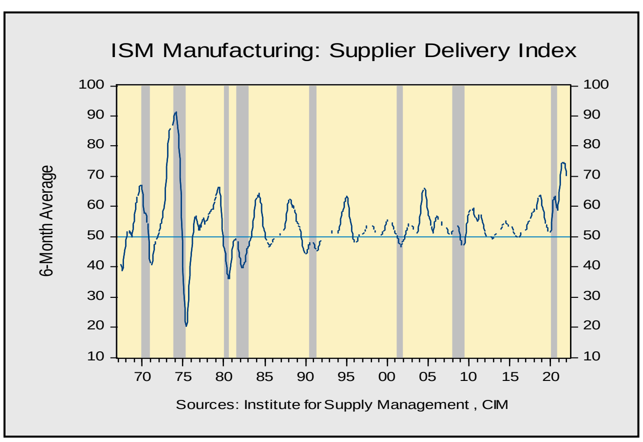
The financial spread widened in February due to the rise in the 10-year Treasury yield. The spread widened from +1.68 to +1.85, above the recession indicator of 0. The rise in longer duration yields is likely the result of growing speculation that the Fed is becoming more hawkish. As a result, the 10-year Treasury rate surged from 1.76% to 1.93%, while the fed funds rate remained unchanged at 0.08%. With the Fed moving to raise rates, this spread will likely narrow in the coming months.

36-Month Moving Average Change for Housing Starts



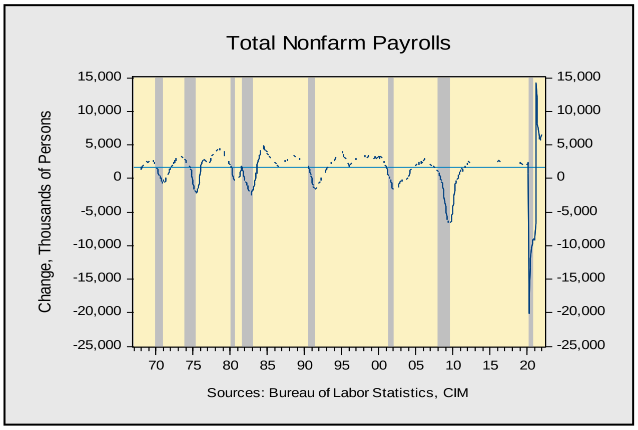
In February, residential construction rebounded to its highest level since July 2006. Housing starts expanded last month at an annualized pace of 1,769K, lower than the previous month's report of 1,657K. The sharp rise in housing starts is due to homebuilders catching up on backorders. Despite the rise in starts, homebuilders are still struggling to secure material inputs and labor. The pickup in construction coincided with a dip in homebuilder confidence. The latest NAHB report showed that the Housing Market Index fell for the third consecutive month, from 81 to 79. The drop in sentiment is related to continued supply chain disruptions and inflation fears. That being said, the 36-month moving average for the change of housing starts rose from 11.47 to 17.42, well above the recession signal of 0.

ISM Manufacturing: Supplier Delivery Index



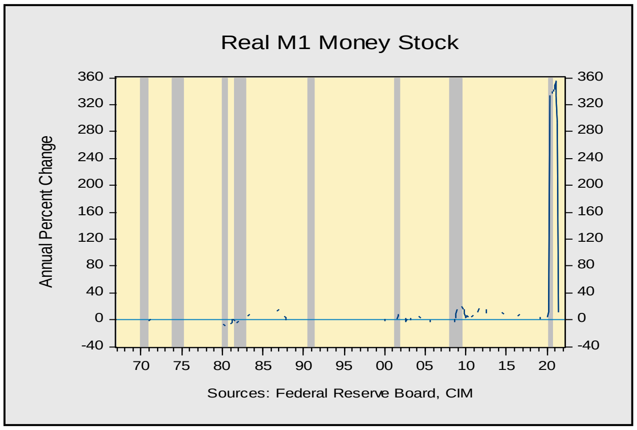
The Supplier Delivery Index rose for the first time in four months. The February report attributed the slowdown in the deliveries to sustained demand for goods and difficulties obtaining required inputs. In general, the index assumes that slower deliveries reflect strengthening demand. In this case, the assumption is only partially accurate. However, the indicator is still contributing positively to the diffusion index. As a result, the ISM Supplier Delivery Index came in at 66.1 in February, above the previous month's reading of 64.9, while the six-month moving average fell slightly from 70.0 to 69.5.

Total Nonfarm Payrolls



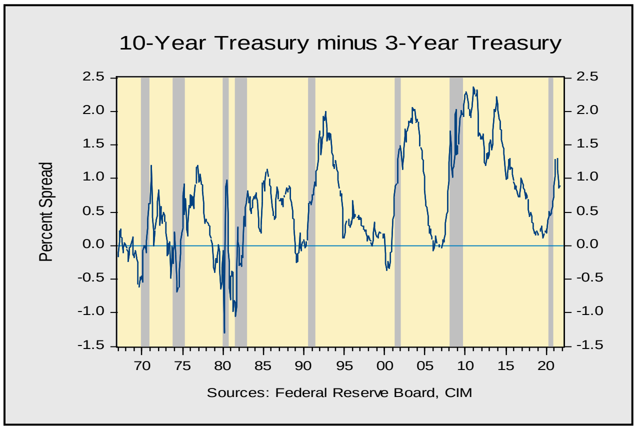
In February, the country gained 654K jobs for a 12-month moving sum of 6.672MM. Most of the jobs added came from the private services-providing sector, primarily in *Leisure & Hospitality*, which added 179K. In total, the services-providing sector accounted for 549K new jobs. The government sector added 24K, while the goods-producing sector added 105K. Currently, the indicator is significantly above the recession signal of 1.600MM.

Real M1 Money Stock



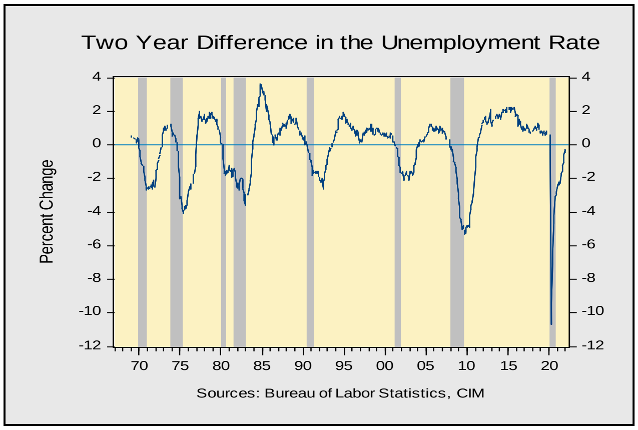
The rise in Real M1 money stock slowed in February. Real M1, which is M1 minus CPI, rose 4.77% from the prior year, down from the previous month's reading of 6.29%. The sharp rise in the graph was largely due to a change that the Federal Reserve made to its calculation of M1 in March 2020. The Fed replaced *other checkable deposits* with *other liquid deposits*. The latter includes savings deposits in addition to checkable deposits in thrift institutions and commercial banks. The inclusion of savings deposits means that M1 also reflects household savings. The distortion of the change moderated last year; however, the impact is still observable in the graph.

10-Year Treasury Minus Three-Year Treasury



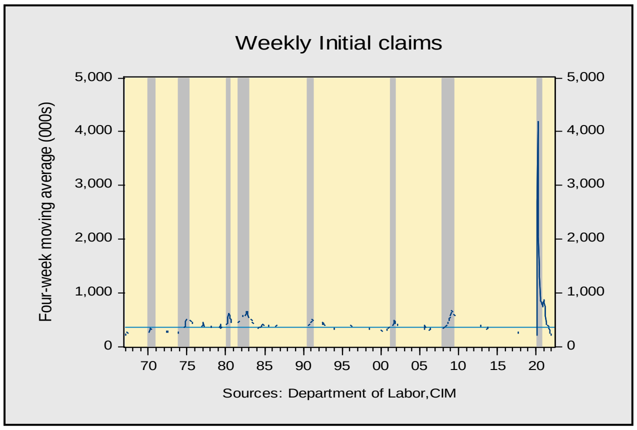
The yields spread between the 10-year and 3-year Treasury narrowed last month because of concerns regarding the Federal Reserve and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In February, the rise in short-duration bonds drastically outpaced long-duration bonds. The spread between the 10-year and three-year Treasury narrowed by 23 bps, from +0.51 in the previous month to +0.28. Last month, the 10-year Treasury yield rose 17 bps from +1.76 to +1.93, while the three-year Treasury rose by 40 bps from +1.25 to +1.65.

Two-Year Difference in the Unemployment Rate



The two-year spread in the unemployment rate narrowed from -0.5 to -0.3, contributing negatively to the diffusion index in February. Last month, the unemployment rate fell from 4.0% to 3.8%, above its level of 3.5% two years prior. The drop in the unemployment rate was largely due to more workers finding work. The number of workers employed rose 0.35% from the prior month, while the civilian labor force rose by 0.19% and the number of unemployed workers fell by 3.73% from the previous month.

Weekly Initial Claims



In February, the four-week moving average fell further below the recession indicator. Last month, initial claims fell by 23K from the prior month, falling to 254K from 231K. The decline in weekly initial claims is due to an improvement in labor market conditions following a drop in Omicron cases.

Thomas Wash
March 31, 2022

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Glossary of Charts

Consumer Confidence: The Consumer Confidence Index is an economic indicator that measures the level of consumer optimism about the overall state of the economy and consumers' personal financial situations. This chart shows the 12-month moving average of the annual change of the index.

Wilshire 5000 Index: This chart shows the annual change in the Wilshire 5000 Total Return Index, which is the broadest U.S. equity index. The index contains 3,500 stocks and is designed to track overall performance of the U.S. stock market. It is an important indicator because steep equity pullbacks have often coincided with economic contractions.

Three-Month Average Manufacturers New Orders Nondefense Capital Goods excluding Aircrafts: This chart shows the annual change in the value of core capital goods orders. This indicator gives insight into the amount of business investment spending. A positive report suggests that manufacturers are optimistic about future demand.

10-Year Treasury Constant Maturity Minus Federal Funds Rate: This chart shows the spread between the 10-year maturity and the fed funds rate. It reflects market sentiment of the future state of the economy. Generally speaking, a negative spread suggests a contraction is likely to occur within 24 months.

36-Month Moving Average Change for Housing Starts: This chart shows the 36-month moving average of the annual change in housing starts. This is an important indicator because it provides a gauge of future construction activity. If housing starts are strong it implies that builders are optimistic about future demand.

ISM Manufacturing (Six-Month Average): The ISM Manufacturing Index is a report that monitors employment, production, inventories, new orders, and supplier deliveries. This index specifically focuses on the six-month moving average of supplier deliveries section in ISM, which we believe is a good gauge of future levels of manufacturing activity. A reading above 50 signals that manufacturing activity is expected to expand, while a reading below 50 signals that manufacturing activity is expected to contract.

Total Nonfarm Payrolls: This chart shows the 12-month moving sum of total nonfarm payrolls. This report represents the total number of workers added to the workforce excluding proprietors, private household employees, unpaid volunteers, farm employees and incorporated self-employed. It is a significant indicator of the strength of the labor market. A moving sum that exceeds 1,600 suggests the demand for labor is strong.

Real M1 Money Stock: The Real M1 Money Stock report measures the annual change in the money supply minus inflation. M1 is the measure of currency in circulation and represents the amount of money being held for transaction purposes, therefore it can act as a proxy for economic activity.

10-Year Treasury Minus Three-Year Treasury: This chart shows the spread between the 10-year and three-year Treasury, a gauge of investor sentiment. A widening spread suggests investors are optimistic about the state of the economy, whereas a negative spread suggests pessimism. This indicator is less sensitive than the financial spread as it is less affected by the Fed's decisions.

Two-Year Difference in the Unemployment Rate: The two-year difference in the unemployment rate measures the amount of slack in the labor market. When the difference of the two-year unemployment rate falls below zero it indicates the labor market is becoming less tight.

Weekly Initial Claims: This chart shows the four-week moving average of initial jobless claims. A rising initial claims number means the demand for labor is weakening, likely due to a worsening business environment. If the four-week moving average rises above 350K, it signals the economy may be headed toward a contraction.