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Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System

Monetary Policy Report to the Congress Pursuant to the Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act of 1978

February 17, 2000

Letter of Transmittal

BOARD OF GOVERNORS OF THE
FEDERAL RESERVE SYSTEM
Washington, D.C., February 17, 2000

THE PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE
THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

The Board of Governors is pleased to submit its Monetary Policy Report to the Congress, pursuant to the Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act of 1978.

Sincerely,

Alan Greenspan, Chairman

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Monetary Policy Report to the Congress

Report submitted to the Congress on February 17, 2000, pursuant to the Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act of 1978

Monetary Policy and the Economic Outlook

The U.S. economy posted another exceptional performance in 1999. The ongoing expansion appears to have maintained strength into early 2000 as it set a record for longevity, and—aside from the direct effects of higher crude oil prices—inflation has remained subdued, in marked contrast to the typical experience during previous expansions. The past year brought additional evidence that productivity growth has improved substantially since the mid-1990s, boosting living standards while helping to hold down increases in costs and prices despite very tight labor markets.

The Federal Open Market Committee's pursuit of financial conditions consistent with sustained expansion and low inflation has required some adjustments to the settings of monetary policy instruments over the past two years. In late 1998, to cushion the U.S. economy from the effects of disruptions in world financial markets and to ameliorate some of the resulting strains, money market conditions were eased. By the middle of last year, however, with financial markets resuming normal functioning, foreign economies recovering, and domestic demand continuing to outpace increases in productive potential, the Committee began to reverse that easing.

As the year progressed, foreign economies, in general, recovered more quickly and displayed greater vigor than had seemed likely at the start of the year. Domestically, the rapid productivity growth raised expectations of future incomes and profits and thereby helped keep spending moving up at a faster clip than current productive capacity. Meanwhile, prices of most internationally traded materials rebounded from their earlier declines; this turnaround, together with a flattening of the exchange value of the dollar after its earlier appreciation, translated into an easing of downward pressure on the prices of imports in general. Core inflation measures generally remained low, but with the labor market at its tightest in three decades and becoming tighter, the risk that pressures on costs and prices would eventually emerge mounted over the course of the year. To maintain the low-inflation environment that has been so important to the sustained health of the current expansion, the FOMC ultimately implemented four quarter-point increases in the intended federal funds rate, the most recent of which came at the beginning of this month. In total, the federal funds rate has been raised 1 percentage point, although, at 5¾ percent, it stands only ¼ point above its level just before the autumn-1998 financial market turmoil. At its most recent meeting, the FOMC indicated that risks appear to remain on the side of heightened inflation pressures, so it will need to remain especially attentive to developments in this regard.

Monetary Policy, Financial Markets, and the Economy over 1999 and Early 2000

The first quarter of 1999 saw a further unwinding of the heightened levels of perceived risk and risk aversion that had afflicted financial markets in the autumn of 1998; investors became much more willing to advance funds, securities issuance picked up, and risk spreads fell further—though not back to the unusually low levels of the first half of 1998. At the same time, domestic demand remained quite strong, and foreign economies showed signs of rebounding. The FOMC concluded at its February and March meetings that, if these trends were to persist, the risks of the eventual emergence of somewhat greater inflation pressures would increase, and it noted that a case could be made for unwinding part of the easing actions of the preceding fall. However, the Committee hesitated to adjust policy before having greater assurance that the recoveries in domestic financial markets and foreign economies were on firm footing.

By the May meeting, these recoveries were solidifying, and the pace of domestic spending appeared to be outstripping the growth of the economy's potential, even allowing for an appreciable acceleration in productivity. The Committee still expected some slowing in the expansion of aggregate demand, but the timing and extent of any moderation remained uncertain. Against this backdrop, the FOMC main-

tained an unchanged policy stance but announced immediately after the meeting that it had chosen a directive tilted toward the possibility of a firming of rates. This announcement implemented the disclosure policy adopted in December 1998, whereby major shifts in the Committee's views about the balance of risks or the likely direction of future policy would be made public immediately. Members expected that, by making the FOMC's concerns public earlier, such announcements would encourage financial market reactions to subsequent information that would help stabilize the economy. In practice, however, those reactions seemed to be exaggerated and to focus even more than usual on possible near-term Committee action.

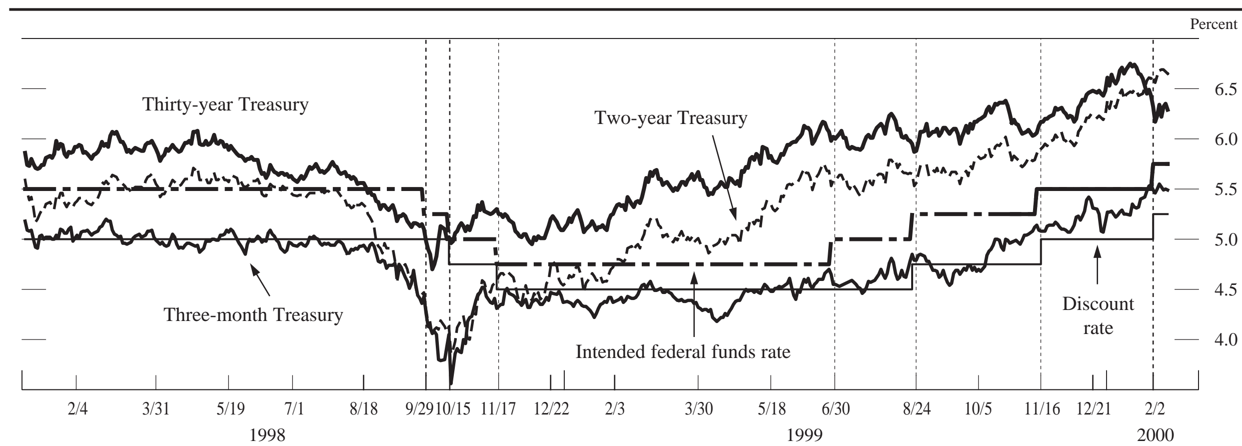
Over subsequent weeks, economic activity continued to expand vigorously, labor markets remained very tight, and oil and other commodity prices rose further. In this environment, the FOMC saw an updrift in inflation as a significant risk in the absence of some policy firming, and at the June meeting it raised the intended level of the federal funds rate ¼ percentage point. The Committee also announced a symmetric directive, noting that the marked degree of uncertainty about the extent and timing of prospective inflationary pressures meant that further firming of policy might not be undertaken in the near term, but that the Committee would need to be especially alert to emerging inflation pressures. Markets rallied on the symmetric-directive announcement, and the strength of this response together with market commentary suggested uncertainty about the interpretation of the language used to characterize possible future developments and about the time period to which the directive applied.

In the period between the June and August meetings, the ongoing strength of domestic demand and further expansion abroad suggested that at least part of the remaining easing put in place the previous fall to deal with financial market stresses was no longer needed. Consequently, at the August meeting the FOMC raised the intended level of the federal funds rate a further ¼ percentage point, to 5¼ percent. The Committee agreed that this action, along with that taken in June, would substantially reduce inflation risks and again announced a symmetric directive. In a related action, the Board of Governors approved an increase in the discount rate to 4¾ percent. At this meeting the Committee also established a working group to assess the FOMC's approach to disclosing its view about prospective developments and to propose procedural modifications.

At its August meeting, the FOMC took a number of actions that were aimed at enhancing the ability of the Manager of the System Open Market Account to counter potential liquidity strains in the period around the century date change and that would also help ensure the effective implementation of the Committee's monetary policy objectives. Although members believed that efforts to prepare computer systems for the century date change had made the probability of significant disruptions quite small, some aversion to Y2K risk exposure was already evident in the markets, and the costs that might stem from a dysfunctional financing market at year-end were deemed to be unacceptably high. The FOMC agreed to authorize, temporarily, (1) a widening of the pool of collateral that could be accepted in System open market transactions, (2) the use of reverse repurchase agreement accounting in addition to the currently available matched sale–purchase transactions to absorb reserves temporarily, and (3) the auction of options on repurchase agreements, reverse repurchase agreements, and matched sale–purchase transactions that could be exercised in the period around year-end. The Committee also authorized a permanent extension of the maximum maturity on regular repurchase and matched sale–purchase transactions from sixty to ninety days.

The broader range of collateral approved for repurchase transactions—mainly pass-through mortgage securities of government-sponsored enterprises and STRIP securities of the U.S. Treasury—would facilitate the Manager's task of addressing what could be very large needs to supply reserves in the succeeding months, primarily in response to rapid increases in the demand for currency, at a time of potentially heightened demand in various markets for U.S. government securities. The standby financing facility, authorizing the Federal Reserve Bank of New York to auction the above-mentioned options to the government securities dealers that are regular counterparties in the System's open market operations, would encourage marketmaking and the maintenance of liquid financing markets essential to effective open market operations. The standby facility was also viewed as a useful complement to the special liquidity facility, which was to provide sound depository institutions with unrestricted access to the discount window, at a penalty rate, between October 1999 and April 2000. Finally, the decision to extend the maximum maturity on repurchase and matched sale–purchase transactions was intended to bring the terms of such transactions into conformance with market practice and to enhance the Manager's ability over the following months to implement the unusually large reserve operations expected to be required around the turn of the year.

Selected interest rates



Note. The data are daily. Vertical lines indicate the days on which the Federal Reserve announced a monetary policy action. The dates on the horizontal axis are those on which either the FOMC held a scheduled meeting or a policy action was announced. Last observations are for February 11, 2000.

Incoming information during the period leading up to the FOMC's October meeting suggested that the growth of domestic economic activity had picked up from the second quarter's pace, and foreign economies appeared to be strengthening more than had been anticipated, potentially adding pressure to already-taut labor markets and possibly creating inflationary imbalances that would undermine economic performance. But the FOMC viewed the risk of a significant increase in inflation in the near term as small and decided to await more evidence on how the economy was responding to its previous tightenings before changing its policy stance. However, the Committee anticipated that the evidence might well signal the need for additional tightening, and it again announced a directive that was biased toward restraint.

Information available through mid-November pointed toward robust growth in overall economic activity and a further depletion of the pool of unemployed workers willing to take a job. Although higher real interest rates appeared to have induced some softening in interest-sensitive sectors of the economy, the anticipated moderation in the growth of aggregate demand did not appear sufficient to avoid added pressures on resources, predominantly labor. These conditions, along with further increases in oil and other commodity prices, suggested a significant risk that inflation would pick up over time, given prevailing financial conditions. Against this backdrop, the FOMC raised the target for the federal funds rate an additional ¼ percentage point in November. At that time, a symmetric directive was adopted, consistent with the Committee's expectation that no further policy move was likely to be considered before the February meeting. In a related action, the Board of Governors approved an increase in the discount rate of ¼ percentage point, to 5 percent.

At the December meeting, FOMC members held the stance of policy unchanged and, to avoid any misinterpretation of policy intentions that might unsettle financial markets around the century date change, announced a symmetric directive. But the statement issued after the meeting also highlighted members' continuing concern about inflation risks going forward and indicated the Committee's intention to evaluate, as soon as its next meeting, whether those risks suggested that further tightening was appropriate.

The FOMC also decided on some modifications to its disclosure procedures at the December meeting, at which the working group mentioned above transmitted its final report and proposals. These modifications, announced in January 2000, consisted primarily of a plan to issue a statement after every FOMC meeting that not only would convey the current stance of policy but also would categorize risks to the outlook as either weighted mainly toward conditions that may generate heightened inflation pressures, weighted mainly toward conditions that may generate economic weakness, or balanced with respect to the goals of maximum employment and stable prices over the foreseeable future. The changes eliminated uncertainty about the circumstances under which an announcement would be made; they clarified that the Committee's statement about future prospects extended beyond the intermeeting period; and they characterized the Committee's views about future developments in a way that reflected policy discussions and that members hoped would be more helpful to the public and to financial markets.

Financial markets and the economy came through the century date change smoothly. By the February 2000 meeting, there was little evidence that demand was coming into line with potential supply, and the risks of inflationary imbalances appeared to have risen. At the meeting, the FOMC raised its target for the federal funds rate ¼ percentage point to 5¾ percent, and characterized the risks as remaining on the side of higher inflation pressures. In a related action, the Board of Governors approved a ¼ percentage point increase in the discount rate, to 5¼ percent.

Economic Projections for 2000

The members of the Board of Governors and the Federal Reserve Bank presidents, all of whom participate in the deliberations of the FOMC, expect to see another year of favorable economic performance in 2000, although the risk of higher inflation will need to be watched especially carefully. The central tendency of the FOMC participants' forecasts of real GDP growth from the fourth quarter of 1999 to the fourth quarter of 2000 is 3½ percent to 3¾ percent. A substantial part of the gain in output will likely come from further increases in productivity. Nonetheless, economic expansion at the pace that is anticipated should create enough new jobs to keep the unemployment rate in a range of 4 percent to 4¼ percent, close to its recent average. The central tendency of the FOMC participants' inflation forecasts for 2000—as measured by the chain-type price index for personal consumption expenditures—is 1¾ percent to 2 percent, a range that runs a little to the low side of the energy-led 2 percent rise posted in 1999.[1] Even though futures markets suggest that energy prices may turn down later this year, prices elsewhere in the economy could be pushed upward by a combination of factors, including reduced restraint from non-oil import prices, wage and price pressures associated with lagged effects of the past year's oil price rise, and larger increases in costs that might be forthcoming in another year of tight labor markets.

1. Economic projections for 2000

Percent

Indicator	Memo: 1999 actual	Federal Reserve governors and Reserve Bank presidents	
		Range	Central tendency
Change, fourth quarter to fourth quarter[1]			
Nominal GDP	5.9	5–6	5¼–5½
Real GDP[2]	4.2	3¼–4¼	3½–3¾
PCE chain-type price index	2.0	1½–2½	1¾–2
Average level, fourth quarter			
Civilian unemployment rate	4.1	4–4¼	4–4¼

1. Change from average for fourth quarter of 1999 to average for fourth quarter of 2000.

2. Chain-weighted.

The performance of the economy—both the rate of real growth and the rate of inflation—will depend importantly on the course of productivity. Typically, in past business expansions, gains in labor productivity eventually slowed as rising demand placed increased pressure on plant capacity and on the workforce, and a similar slowdown from the recent rapid pace of productivity gain cannot be ruled out. But with many firms still in the process of implementing technologies that have proved effective in reorganizing internal operations or in gaining speedier access to outside resources and markets, and with the technologies themselves still advancing rapidly, a further rise in productivity growth from the average pace of recent years also is possible. To the extent that rapid productivity growth can be maintained, aggregate supply can grow faster than would otherwise be possible.

However, the economic processes that are giving rise to faster productivity growth not only are lifting aggregate supply but also are influencing the growth of aggregate spending. With firms perceiving abundant profit opportunities in productivity-enhancing high-tech applications, investment in new equipment has been surging and could well continue to rise rapidly for some time. Moreover, expectations that the investment in new technologies will generate high returns have been lifting the stock market and, in turn, helping to maintain consumer spending at a pace in excess of the current growth of real disposable income. Impetus to demand from this source also could persist for a while longer, given the current

1. In past Monetary Policy Reports to the Congress, the FOMC has framed its inflation forecasts in terms of the consumer price index. The chain-type price index for PCE draws extensively on data from the consumer price index but, while not entirely free of measurement problems, has several advantages relative to the CPI. The PCE chain-type index is constructed from a formula that reflects the changing composition of spending and thereby avoids some of the upward bias associated with the fixed-weight nature of the CPI. In addition, the weights are based on a more comprehensive measure of expenditures. Finally, historical data used in the PCE price index can be revised to account for newly available information and for improvements in measurement techniques, including those that affect source data from the CPI; the result is a more consistent series over time. This switch in presentation notwithstanding, the FOMC will continue to rely on a variety of aggregate price measures, as well as other information on prices and costs, in assessing the path of inflation.

high levels of consumer confidence and the likely lagged effects of the large increments to household wealth registered to date. The boost to aggregate demand from the marked pickup in productivity growth implies that the level of interest rates needed to align demand with potential supply may have increased substantially. Although the recent rise in interest rates may lead to some slowing of spending, aggregate demand may well continue to outpace gains in potential output over the near term, an imbalance that contains the seeds of rising inflationary and financial pressures that could undermine the expansion.

In recent years, domestic spending has been able to grow faster than production without engendering inflation partly because the external sector has provided a safety valve, helping to relieve the pressures on domestic resources. In particular, the rapid growth of demand has been met in part by huge increases in imports of goods and services, and sluggishness in foreign economies has restrained the growth of exports. However, foreign economies have been firming, and if recovery of these economies stays on course, U.S. exports should increase faster than they have in the past couple of years. Moreover, the rapid rise of the real exchange value of the dollar through mid-1998 has since given way to greater stability, on average, and the tendency of the earlier appreciation to limit export growth and boost import growth is now diminishing. From one perspective, these external adjustments are welcome because they will help slow the recent rapid rates of decline in net exports and the current account. They also should give a boost to industries that have been hurt by the export slump, such as agriculture and some parts of manufacturing. At the same time, however, the adjustments are likely to add to the risk of an upturn in the inflation trend, because a strengthening of exports will add to the pressures on U.S. resources and a firming of the prices of non-oil imports will raise costs directly and also reduce to some degree the competitive restraints on the prices of U.S. producers.

Domestically, substantial plant capacity is still available in some manufacturing industries and could continue to exert restraint on firms' pricing decisions, even with a diminution of competitive pressures from abroad. However, an already tight domestic labor market has tightened still further in recent months, and bidding for workers, together with further increases in health insurance costs that appear to be coming, seems likely to keep nominal hourly compensation costs moving up at a relatively brisk pace. To date, the increases in compensation have not had serious inflationary consequences because they have been offset by the advances in labor productivity, which have held unit labor costs in check. But the pool of available workers cannot continue to shrink without at some point touching off cost pressures that even a favorable productivity trend might not be able to counter. Although the governors and Reserve Bank presidents expect productivity gains to be substantial again this year, incoming data on costs, prices, and price expectations will be examined carefully to make sure a pickup of inflation does not start to become embedded in the economy.

The FOMC forecasts are more optimistic than the economic predictions that the Administration recently released, but the Administration has noted that it is being conservative in regard to its assumptions about productivity growth and the potential expansion of the economy. Relative to the Administration's forecast, the FOMC is predicting a somewhat larger rise in real GDP in 2000 and a slightly lower unemployment rate. The inflation forecasts are fairly similar, once account is taken of the tendency for the consumer price index to rise more rapidly than the chain-type price index for personal consumption expenditures.

Money and Debt Ranges for 2000

At its most recent meeting, the FOMC reaffirmed the monetary growth ranges for 2000 that were chosen on a provisional basis last July: 1 percent to 5 percent for M2, and 2 percent to 6 percent for M3. As has been the case for some time, these ranges were chosen to encompass money growth under conditions of price stability and historical velocity relationships, rather than to center on the expected growth of money over the coming year or serve as guides to policy.

Given continued uncertainty about movements in the velocities of M2 and M3 (the ratios of nominal GDP to the aggregates), the Committee still has little confidence that money growth within any particular range selected for the year would be associated with the economic performance it expected or desired.

2. Ranges for growth of monetary and debt aggregates
Percent

Aggregate	1998	1999	2000
M2	1–5	1–5	1–5
M3	2–6	2–6	2–6
Debt	3–7	3–7	3–7

Note. Change from average for fourth quarter of preceding year to average for fourth quarter of year indicated.

Nonetheless, the Committee believes that money growth has some value as an economic indicator, and it will continue to monitor the monetary aggregates among a wide variety of economic and financial data to inform its policy deliberations.

M2 increased 6¼ percent last year. With nominal GDP rising 6 percent, M2 velocity fell a bit overall, although it rose in the final two quarters of the year as market interest rates climbed relative to yields on M2 assets. Further increases in market interest rates early this year could continue to elevate M2 velocity. Nevertheless, given the Committee's expectations for nominal GDP growth, M2 could still be above the upper end of its range in 2000.

M3 expanded 7½ percent last year, and its velocity fell about 1¾ percent, a much smaller drop than in the previous year. Non-M2 components again exhibited double-digit growth, with some of the strength attributable to long-term trends and some to precautionary buildups of liquidity in advance of the century date change. One important trend is the shift by nonfinancial businesses from direct holdings of money market instruments to indirect holdings through institution-only money funds; such shifts boost M3 at the same time they enhance liquidity for businesses. Money market funds and large certificates of deposit also ballooned late in the year as a result of a substantial demand for liquidity around the century date change. Adjustments from the temporarily elevated level of M3 at the end of 1999 are likely to trim that aggregate's fourth-quarter-to-fourth-quarter growth this year, but not sufficiently to offset the downward trend in velocity. That trend, together with the Committee's expectation for nominal GDP growth, will probably keep M3 above the top end of its range again this year.

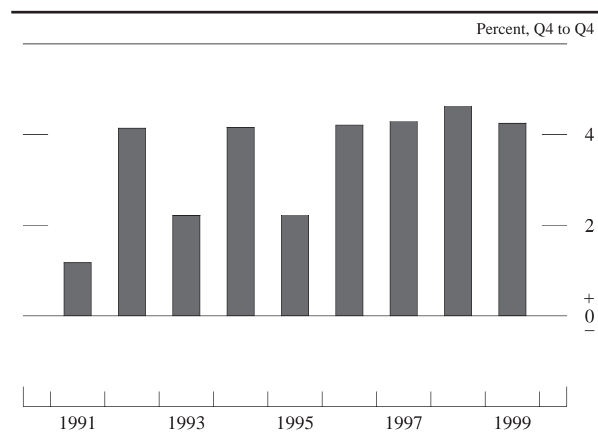
Domestic nonfinancial debt grew 6½ percent in 1999, near the upper end of the 3 percent to 7 percent growth range the Committee established last February. This robust growth reflected large increases in the debt of businesses and households that were due to substantial advances in spending as well as to debt-financed mergers and acquisitions. However, the increase in private-sector debt was partly offset by a substantial decline in federal debt. The Committee left the range for debt growth in 2000 unchanged at 3 percent to 7 percent. After an aberrant period in the 1980s during which debt expanded much more rapidly than nominal GDP, the growth of debt has returned to its historical pattern of about matching the growth of nominal GDP over the past decade, and the Committee members expect debt to remain within its range again this year.

Economic and Financial Developments in 1999 and Early 2000

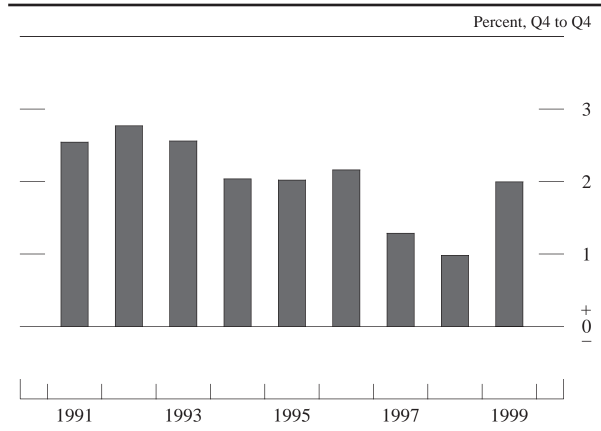
The U.S. economy retained considerable strength in 1999. According to the Commerce Department's advance estimate, the rise in real gross domestic product over the four quarters of the year exceeded 4 percent for the fourth consecutive year. The growth of household expenditures was bolstered by further substantial gains in real income, favorable borrowing terms, and a soaring stock market. Businesses seeking to maintain their competitiveness and profitability continued to invest heavily in high-tech equipment; external financing conditions in both debt and equity markets were quite supportive. In the public sector, further strong growth of revenues was accompanied by a step-up in the growth of government consumption and investment expenditures, the part of government spending that enters directly into real GDP. The rapid growth of domestic demand gave rise to a further huge increase in real imports of goods and services in 1999. Exports picked up as foreign economies strengthened, but the gain fell short of that for imports by a large margin. Available economic indicators for January of this year show the U.S. economy continuing to expand, with labor demand robust and the unemployment rate edging down to its lowest level in thirty years.

The combination of a strong U.S. economy and improving economic conditions abroad led to firmer prices in some markets this past year. Industrial commodity prices turned up—sharply in some cases—after having dropped appreciably in 1998. Oil prices, responding both to OPEC production restraint and to the growth of world demand, more than doubled over the course of the year, and the prices of non-oil imports declined less rapidly than in previous years,

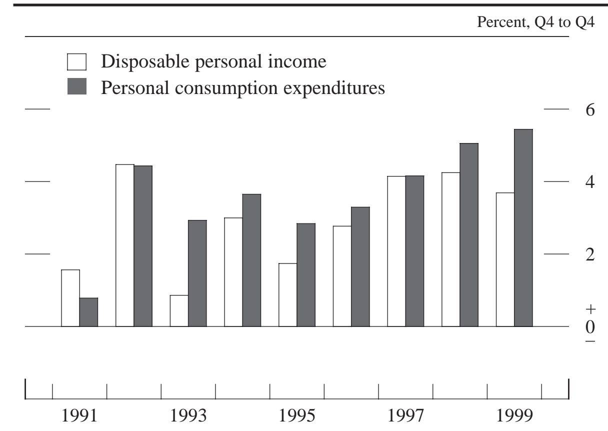
Change in real GDP



Change in PCE chain-type price index



Change in real income and consumption



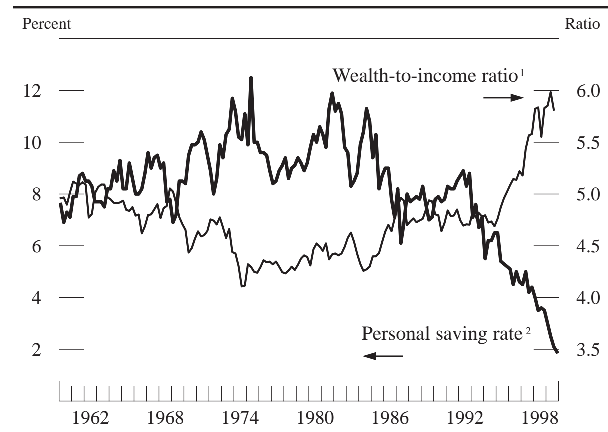
when a rising dollar, as well as sluggish conditions abroad, had pulled them lower. The higher oil prices of 1999 translated into sharp increases in retail energy prices and gave a noticeable boost to consumer prices overall; the chain-type price index for personal consumption expenditures rose 2 percent, double the increase of 1998. Outside the energy sector, however, consumer prices increased at about the same low rate as in the previous year, even as the unemployment rate continued to edge down. Rapid gains in productivity enabled businesses to offset a substantial portion of the increases in nominal compensation, thereby holding the rise of unit labor costs in check, and business pricing policies continued to be driven to a large extent by the desire to maintain or increase market share at the expense of some slippage in unit profits, albeit from a high level.

The Household Sector

Personal consumption expenditures increased about 5½ percent in real terms in 1999, a second year of exceptionally rapid advance. As in other recent years, the strength of consumption in 1999 reflected sustained increases in employment and real hourly pay, which bolstered the growth of real disposable personal income. Added impetus came from another year of rapid growth in net worth, which, coming on top of the big gains of previous years, led households in the aggregate to spend a larger portion of their current income than they would have otherwise. The personal saving rate, as measured in the national income and product accounts, dropped further, to an average of about 2 percent in the final quarter of 1999; it has fallen about 4½ percentage points over the past five years, a period during which yearly gains in household net worth have averaged more than 10 percent in nominal terms and the ratio of household wealth to disposable personal income has moved up sharply.

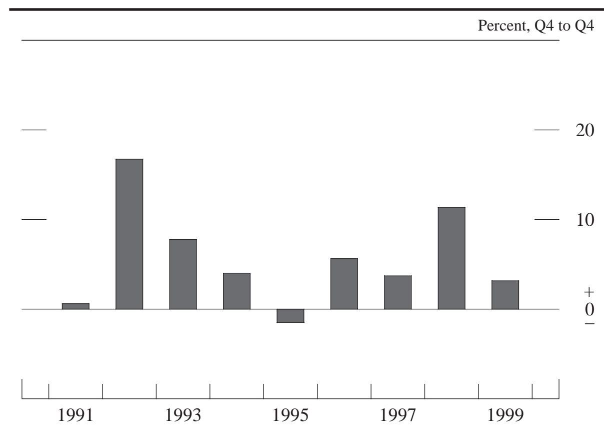
The strength of consumer spending this past year extended across a broad front. Appreciable gains were reported for most types of durable goods. Spending on motor vehicles, which had surged about 13½ percent in 1998, moved up another 5½ percent in 1999. The inflation-adjusted increases for furniture, appliances, electronic equipment, and other household durables also were quite large, supported in part by a strong housing market. Spending on services advanced about 4½ percent in real terms, led by sizable increases for recreation and personal business services. Outlays for nondurables, such as food and clothing, also rose rapidly. Exceptional strength in

Wealth and saving



1. Ratio of net worth of households to disposable personal income. The data extend through 1999:Q3.
2. The data extend through 1999:Q4.

Change in real residential investment



the purchases of some nondurables toward the end of the year may have reflected precautionary buying by consumers in anticipation of the century date change; it is notable in this regard that grocery store sales were up sharply in December and then fell back in January, according to the latest report on retail sales.

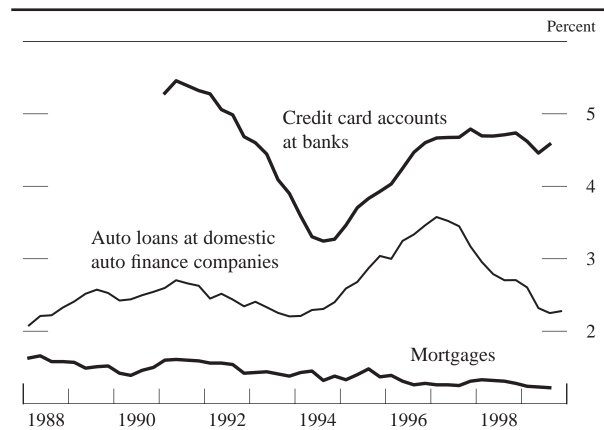
Households also continued to boost their expenditures on residential structures. After having surged 11 percent in 1998, residential investment rose about 3¼ percent over the four quarters of 1999, according to the advance estimate from the Commerce Department. Moderate declines in investment in the second half of the year offset only part of the increases recorded in the first half. As with consumption expenditures, investment in housing was supported by the sizable advances in real income and household net worth, but this spending category was also tempered a little by a rise in mortgage interest rates, which likely was an important factor in the second-half downturn.

Nearly all the indicators of housing activity showed upbeat results for the year. Annual sales of new and existing homes reached new peaks in 1999, surpassing the previous highs set in 1998. Although sales dropped back a touch in the second half of the year, their level through year-end remained quite high by historical standards. Builders' backlogs also were at high levels and helped support new construction activity even as sales eased. Late in the year, reports that shortages of skilled workers were delaying construction became less frequent as building activity wound down seasonally, but builders also continued to express concern about potential worker shortages in 2000. For 1999 in total, construction began on more than 1.3 million single-family dwellings, the most since the late 1970s; approximately 330,000 multifamily units also were started, about the same number as in each of the two previous years. House prices rose appreciably and, together with the new investment, further boosted household net worth in residential real estate.

The increases in consumption and residential investment in 1999 were, in part, financed by an expansion of household debt estimated at 9½ percent, the largest increase in more than a decade. Mortgage debt, which includes the borrowing against owner equity that may be used for purposes other than residential investment, grew a whopping 10¼ percent. Higher interest rates led to a sharp drop in refinancing activity and prompted a shift toward the use of adjustable-rate mortgages, which over the year rose from 10 percent to 30 percent of originations. Consumer credit advanced 7¼ percent, boosted by heavy demand for consumer durables and other big-ticket purchases. Credit supply conditions were also favorable; commercial banks reported in Federal Reserve surveys that they were more willing than in the previous year or two to make consumer installment loans and that they remained quite willing to make mortgage loans.

The household sector's debt-service burden edged up to its highest level since the late 1980s; however, with employment rising rapidly and asset values escalating, measures of credit quality for household debt generally improved in 1999. Delinquency rates on home mortgages and credit cards declined a bit, and those on auto loans fell more noticeably. Personal bankruptcy filings fell sharply after having risen for several years to 1997 and remaining elevated in 1998.

Delinquency rates on household loans



NOTE. The data are quarterly. Data on credit-card delinquencies are from bank Call Reports; data on auto loan delinquencies are from the Big Three automakers; data on mortgage delinquencies are from the Mortgage Bankers Association.

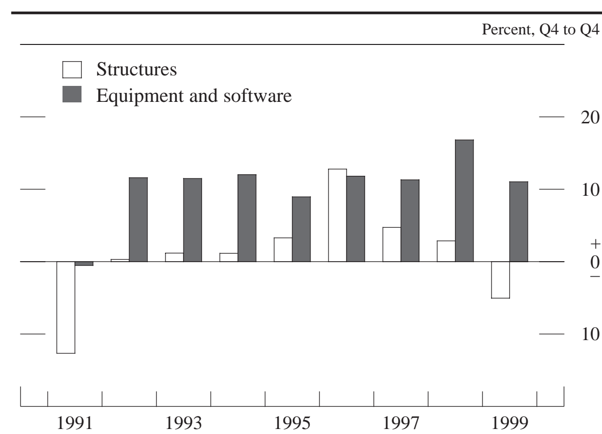
The Business Sector

Private nonresidential fixed investment increased 7 percent during 1999, extending by another year a long run of rapid growth in real investment outlays. Strength in capital investment has been underpinned in recent years by the vigor of the business expansion, by the advance and spread of computer technologies, and by the ability of most businesses to readily obtain funding through the credit and equity markets.

Investment in high-tech equipment continued to soar in 1999. Outlays for communications equipment rose about 25 percent over the course of the year, boosted by a number of factors, including the expansion of wireless communications, competition in telephone markets, the continued spread of the Internet, and the demand of Internet users for faster access to it. Computer outlays rose nearly 40 percent in real terms, and the purchases of computer software, which in the national accounts are now counted as part of private fixed investment, rose about 13 percent; for both computers and software the increases were roughly in line with the annual average gains during previous years of the expansion.

The timing of investment in high-tech equipment over the past couple of years was likely affected to some degree by business preparations for the century date change. Many large businesses reportedly invested most heavily in new computer equipment before the start of 1999 to leave sufficient time for their systems to be tested well before the start of 2000; a very steep rise in computer investment in 1998—roughly 60 percent in real terms—is consistent with those reports. Some of the purchases in preparation for Y2K most likely spilled over into 1999, but the past year also brought numerous reports of businesses wanting to stand pat with existing systems until after the turn of the year. Growth in computer investment in the final quarter of 1999, just before the century rollover, was the smallest in several quarters.

Change in real nonresidential fixed investment



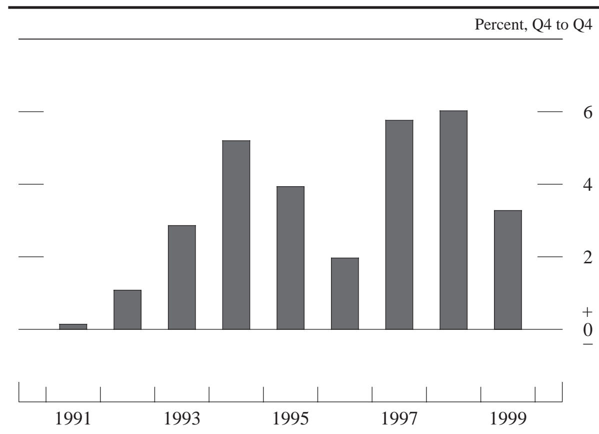
Spending on other types of equipment rose moderately, on balance, in 1999. Outlays for transportation equipment increased substantially, led by advances in business purchases of motor vehicles and aircraft. By contrast, a sharp decline in spending on industrial machinery early in the year held the yearly gain for that category to about 2 percent; over the final three quarters of the year, however, outlays picked up sharply as industrial production strengthened.

Private investment in nonresidential structures fell 5 percent in 1999 according to the advance estimate from the Commerce Department. Spending on structures had increased in each of the previous seven years, rather briskly at times, and the level of investment, though down this past year, remained relatively high and likely raised the real stock of capital invested in structures appreciably further. Real expenditures on office buildings, which have been climbing rapidly for several years, moved up further in 1999, to the highest level since the peak of the building boom of the 1980s. In contrast, investment in other types of commercial structures, which had already regained its earlier peak, slipped back a little, on net, this past year. Spending on industrial structures, which accounts for roughly 10 percent of total real outlays on structures, fell for a third consecutive year. Outlays for the main types of institutional structures also were down, according to the initial estimates. Revisions to the data on nonresidential structures often are sizable, and the estimates for each of the three years preceding 1999 have eventually shown a good bit more strength than was initially reported.

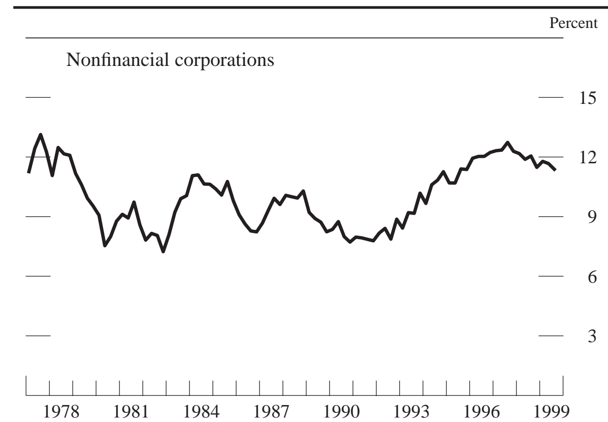
After increasing for two years at a rate of about 6 percent, nonfarm business inventories expanded more slowly this past year—about 3¼ percent according to the advance GDP report. During the year, some businesses indicated that they planned to carry heavier stocks toward year-end to protect themselves against possible Y2K disruptions, and the rate of accumulation did in fact pick up appreciably in the fall. But business final sales remained strong, and the ratio of nonfarm stocks to final sales changed little, holding toward the lower end of the range of the past decade. With the ratio so low, businesses likely did not enter the new year with excess stocks.

After slowing to a 1 percent rise in 1998, the economic profits of U.S. corporations—that is, book profits with inventory valuation and capital consumption adjustments—picked up in 1999. Economic profits over the first three quarters of the year averaged

Change in real private nonfarm inventories



Before-tax profits as a share of GDP

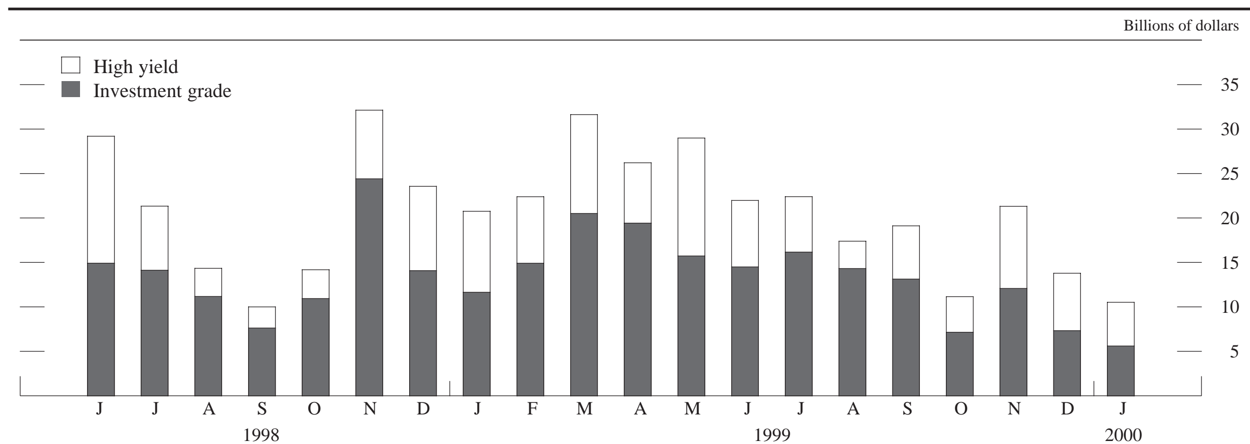


NOTE. Profits from domestic operations, with inventory valuation and capital consumption adjustments, divided by gross domestic product of nonfinancial corporate sector. The data extend through 1999:Q3.

about 3½ percent above the level of a year earlier. The earnings of corporations from their operations outside the United States rebounded in 1999 from a brief but steep decline in the second half of 1998, when financial market disruptions were affecting the world economy. The profits earned by financial corporations on their domestic operations also picked up after having been slowed in 1998 by the financial turmoil; growth of these profits in 1999 would have been greater but for a large payout by insurance companies to cover damage from Hurricane Floyd. The profits that nonfinancial corporations earned on their domestic operations in the first three quarters of 1999 were about 2½ percent above the level of a year earlier; growth of these earnings, which account for about two-thirds of all economic profits, had slowed to just over 2 percent in 1998 after averaging 13 percent at a compound annual rate in the previous six years. Nonfinancial corporations have boosted volume substantially further over the past two years, but profits per unit of output have dropped back somewhat from their 1997 peak. As of the third quarter of last year, economic profits of nonfinancial corporations amounted to slightly less than 11½ percent of the nominal output of these companies, compared with a quarterly peak of about 12¾ percent two years earlier.

The borrowing needs of nonfinancial corporations remained sizable in 1999. Capital spending outstripped internal cash flow, and equity retirements that resulted from stock repurchases and a blockbuster pace of merger activity more than offset record volumes of both seasoned and initial public equity offerings. Overall, the debt of nonfinancial businesses grew 10½ percent, down only a touch from its decade-high 1998 pace.

Gross corporate bond issuance



NOTE. Excludes unrated issues and issues sold abroad.

The strength in business borrowing was widespread across funding sources. Corporate bond issuance was robust, particularly in the first half of the year, though the markets' increased preference for liquidity and quality, amid an appreciable rise in defaults on junk bonds, left issuance of below-investment-grade securities down more than a quarter from their record pace in 1998. The receptiveness of the capital markets helped firms to pay down loans at banks—which had been boosted to an 11¾ percent gain in 1998 by the financial market turmoil that year—and growth in these loans slowed to a more moderate 5¼ percent pace in 1999. The commercial paper market continued to expand rapidly, with domestic nonfinancial outstandings rising 18 percent on top of the 14 percent gain in 1998.

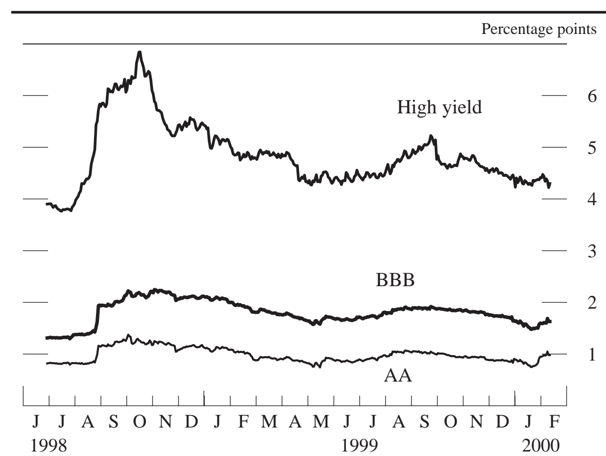
Commercial mortgage borrowing was strong again as well, as real estate prices generally continued to rise, albeit at a slower pace than in 1998, and vacancy rates generally remained near historical lows. The mix of lending shifted back to banks and life insurance companies from commercial mortgage-backed securities, as conditions in the CMBS market, especially investor appetites for lower-rated tranches, remained less favorable than they had been before the credit market disruptions in the fall of 1998.

Risk spreads on corporate bonds seesawed during 1999. Over the early part of the year, spreads reversed part of the 1998 run-up as markets recovered. During the summer, they rose again in response to concerns about market liquidity, expectations of a surge in financing before the century date change, and anticipated firming of monetary policy. Swap spreads, in particular, exhibited upward pressure at this time. The likelihood of year-end difficulties seemed to diminish in the fall, and spreads again retreated, ending the year down on balance but generally above the levels that had prevailed over the several years up to mid-1998.

Federal Reserve surveys indicated that banks firmed terms and standards for commercial and industrial loans a bit further, on balance, in 1999. In the syndicated loan market, spreads for lower-rated borrowers also ended the year higher, on balance, after rising substantially in 1998. Spreads for higher-rated borrowers were fairly steady through 1998 and early 1999, widened a bit around midyear, and then fell back to end the year about where they had started.

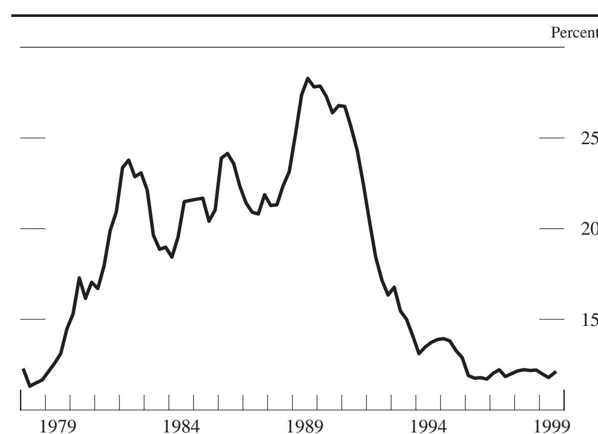
The ratio of net interest payments to cash flow for nonfinancial firms remained in the low range it has occupied for the past few years, but many measures of credit quality nonetheless deteriorated in 1999. Moody's Investors Service downgraded more nonfinancial debt issuers than it upgraded over the year, affecting a net $78 billion of debt. The problems that emerged in the bond market were concentrated mostly among borrowers in the junk sector, and partly reflected a fallout from the large volume of issuance and the generous terms available in 1997 and early 1998; default rates on junk bonds rose to levels not seen since the recession of 1990–91. Delinquency rates on C&I loans at commercial banks ticked up in 1999, albeit from very low levels, while the charge-off rate for those loans continued on its upward trend of the past several years. Business failures edged up last year but remained in a historically low range.

Spreads of corporate bond yields over Treasury security yields



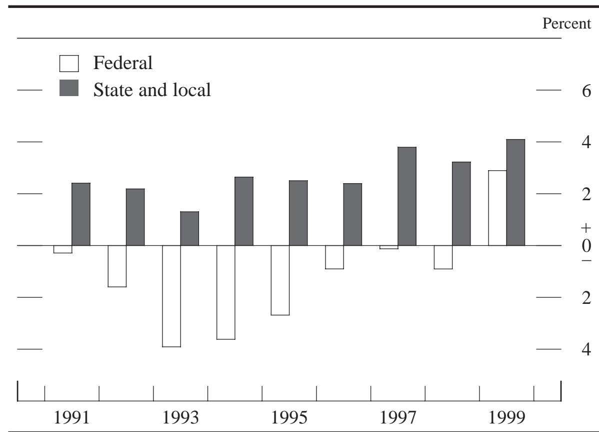
Note. The data are daily. The spread of high-yield bonds compares the yield on the Merrill Lynch 175 index with that on a seven-year Treasury; the other two spreads compare yields on the appropriate Merrill Lynch indexes with that on a ten-year Treasury. Last observations are for February 11, 2000.

Net interest payments of nonfinancial corporations relative to cash flow



Note. The data are quarterly and extend through 1999:Q3.

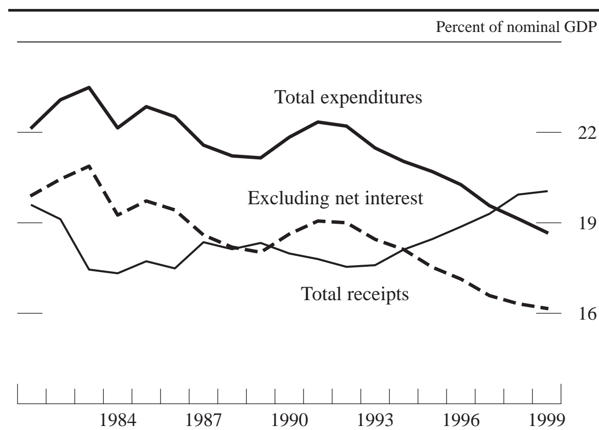
Annual change in real government expenditures on consumption and investment



The Government Sector

Buoyed by rapid increases in receipts and favorable budget balances, the combined real expenditures of federal, state, and local governments on consumption and investment rose about 4¾ percent from the fourth quarter of 1998 to the fourth quarter of 1999. Annual data, which smooth through some of the quarterly noise that is often evident in government outlays, showed a gain in real spending of more than 3½ percent this past year, the largest increase of the expansion. Federal expenditures on consumption and investment were up nearly 3 percent in annual terms; real defense expenditures, which had trended lower through most of the 1990s, rose moderately, and outlays for nondefense consumption and investment increased sharply. Meanwhile, the consumption and investment expenditures of state and local governments rose more than 4 percent in annual terms; growth of these outlays has picked up appreciably as the expansion has lengthened.

Federal receipts and expenditures



NOTE. The data are from the unified budget and are for the fiscal year ended in September.

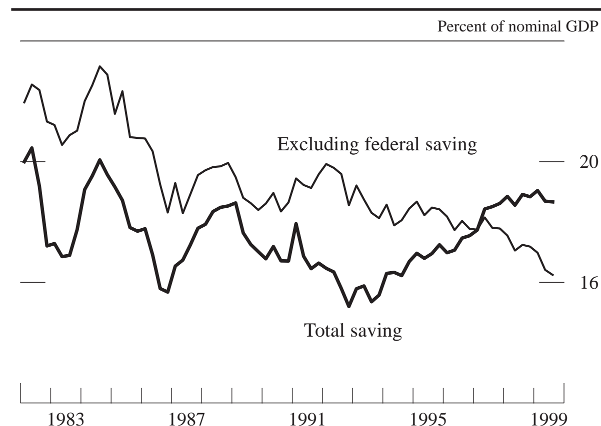
At the federal level, expenditures in the unified budget rose 3 percent in fiscal 1999, just a touch less than the 3¼ percent rise of the preceding fiscal year. Faster growth of nominal spending on items that are included in consumption and investment was offset in the most recent fiscal year by a deceleration in other categories. Net interest outlays fell more than 5 percent—enough to trim total spending growth about ¾ percentage point—and only small increases were recorded in expenditures for social insurance and income security, categories that together account for nearly half of total federal outlays. In contrast, federal expenditures on Medicaid, after having slowed in 1996 and 1997, picked up again in the past two fiscal years. Spending on agriculture doubled in fiscal 1999; the increase resulted both from a step-up in payments under farm safety net programs that were retained in the ''freedom to farm'' legislation of 1996 and from more recent emergency farm legislation.

Federal receipts grew 6 percent in fiscal 1999 after increases that averaged close to 9 percent in the two previous fiscal years. Net receipts from taxes on individuals continued to outpace the growth of personal income, but by less than in other recent years, and receipts from corporate income taxes fell moderately. Nonetheless, with total receipts growing faster than spending, the surplus in the unified budget continued to rise, moving from $69 billion in fiscal 1998 to $124 billion this past fiscal year. Excluding net interest payments—a charge resulting from past deficits—the federal government recorded a surplus of more than $350 billion in fiscal 1999.

Federal saving, a measure that results from a translation of the federal budget surplus into terms consistent with the national income and product accounts, amounted to 2¼ percent of nominal GDP in the first three quarters of 1999, up from 1½ percent in 1998 and ½ percent in 1997. Before 1997, federal saving had been negative for seventeen consecutive years, by amounts exceeding 3 percent of nominal GDP in several years—most recently in 1992. The change in the federal government's saving position from 1992 to 1999 more than offset the sharp drop in the personal saving rate and helped lift national saving from less than 16 percent of nominal GDP in 1992 and 1993 to a range of about 18½ percent to 19 percent over the past several quarters.

Federal debt growth has mirrored the turnabout in the government's saving position. In the 1980s and early 1990s, borrowing resulted in large additions to the volume of outstanding government debt. In contrast, with the budget in surplus the past two

National saving

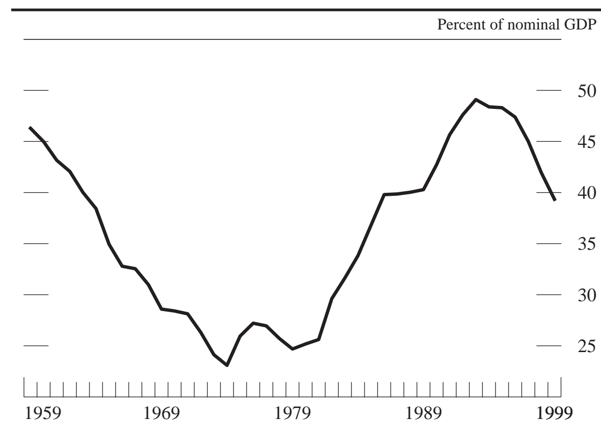


NOTE. National saving includes the gross saving of households, businesses, and governments. The data extend through 1999:Q3.

years, the Treasury has been paying down debt. Without the rise in federal saving and the reversal in borrowing, interest rates in recent years likely would have been higher than they have been, and private capital formation, a key element in the vigorous economic expansion, would have been lower, perhaps appreciably.

The Treasury responded to its lower borrowing requirements in 1999 primarily by reducing the number of auctions of thirty-year bonds from three to two and by trimming auction sizes for notes and Treasury inflation-indexed securities (TIIS). Weekly bill volumes were increased from 1998 levels, however, to help build up cash holdings as a Y2K precaution. For 2000, the Treasury plans major changes in debt management in an attempt to keep down the average maturity of the debt and maintain sufficient auction sizes to support the liquidity and benchmark status of its most recently issued securities, while still retiring large volumes of debt. Alternate quarterly refunding auctions of five- and ten-year notes and semiannual auctions of thirty-year bonds will now be smaller reopenings of existing issues rather than new issues. Thirty-year TIIS will now be auctioned once a year rather than twice, and the two auctions of ten-year TIIS will be modestly reduced. Auctions of one-year Treasury bills will drop from thirteen a year to four, while weekly bill volumes will rise somewhat. Finally, the Treasury plans to enter the market to buy back in "reverse auctions" as much as $30 billion of outstanding securities this year, beginning in March or April.

Federal government debt held by the public



NOTE. The data are annual.

State and local government debt expanded 4¼ percent in 1999, well off last year's elevated pace. Borrowing for new capital investment edged up, but the roughly full-percentage-point rise in municipal bond yields over the year led to a sharp drop in advance refundings, which in turn pulled gross issuance below last year's level. Tax revenues continued to grow at a robust rate, improving the financial condition of states and localities, as reflected in a ratio of debt rating upgrades to downgrades of more than three to one over the year. The surplus in the current account of state and local governments in the first three quarters of 1999 amounted to about ½ percent of nominal GDP, about the same as in 1998 but otherwise the largest of the past several years.

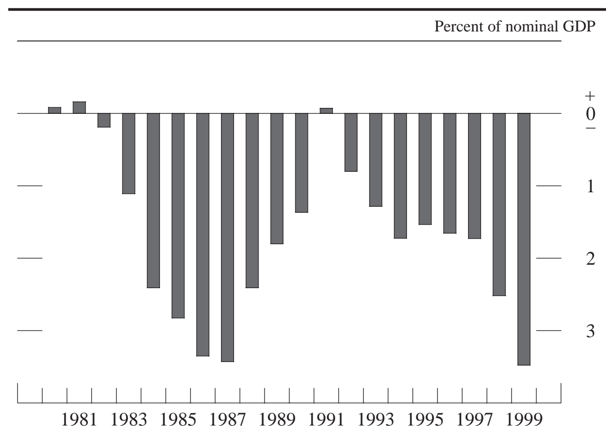
The External Sector

Trade and the Current Account

U.S. external balances deteriorated in 1999 largely because of continued declines in net exports of goods and services and some further weakening of net investment income. The nominal trade deficit for goods and services widened more than $100 billion in 1999, to an estimated $270 billion, as imports expanded faster than exports. For the first three quarters of the year, the current account deficit increased more than one-third, reaching $320 billion at an annual rate, or 3½ percent of GDP. In 1998, the current account deficit was 2½ percent of GDP.

Real imports of goods and services expanded strongly in 1999—about 13 percent according to preliminary estimates—as the rapid import growth during the first half of the year was extended through the second half. The expansion of real imports was fueled by the continued strong growth of U.S. domestic expenditures. Declines in non-oil import prices through most of the year, partly reflecting previous dollar appreciation, contributed as well. All major

U.S. current account

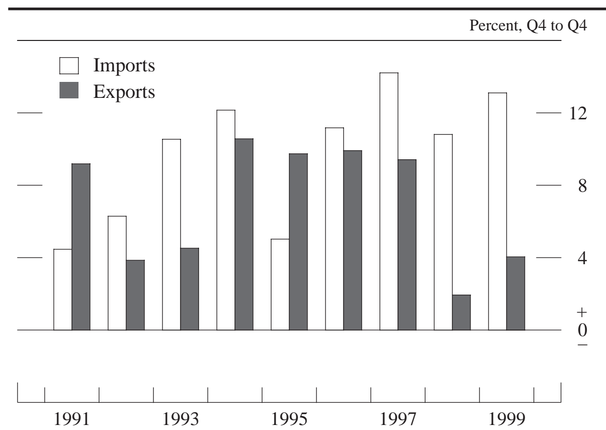


NOTE. The observation for 1999 is the average for the first three quarters of the year.

import categories other than aircraft and oil recorded strong increases. While U.S. consumption of oil rose about 4 percent in 1999, the quantity of oil imported was about unchanged, and inventories were drawn down.

Real exports of goods and services rose an estimated 4 percent in 1999, a somewhat faster pace than in 1998. Economic activity abroad picked up, particularly in Canada, Mexico, and Asian developing economies. However, the lagged effects of relative prices owing to past dollar appreciation held down exports. An upturn in U.S. exports to Canada, Mexico, and key Asian emerging markets contrasted with a much flatter pace of exports to Europe, Japan, and South America. Capital equipment composed about 45 percent of U.S. goods exports, industrial supplies were 20 percent, and agricultural, automotive, and consumer goods were each roughly 10 percent.

Change in real imports and exports of goods and services



Capital Account

U.S. capital flows in 1999 reflected the relatively strong cyclical position of the U.S. economy and the global wave of corporate mergers. Foreign purchases of U.S. securities remained brisk—near the level of the previous two years, in which they had been elevated by the global financial unrest. The composition of foreign securities purchases in 1999 showed a continued shift away from Treasuries, in part because of the U.S. budget surplus and the decline in the supply of Treasuries relative to other securities and, perhaps, to a general increased tolerance of foreign investors for risk as markets calmed after their turmoil of late 1998. Available data indicate that private foreigners sold on net about $20 billion in Treasuries, compared with net purchases of $50 billion in 1998 and $150 billion in 1997. These sales of Treasuries were more than offset by a pickup in foreign purchases of their nearest substitute—government agency bonds—as well as corporate bonds and equities.

Foreign direct investment flows into the United States were also robust in 1999, with the pace of inflows in the first three quarters only slightly below the record inflow set in 1998. As in 1998, direct investment inflows last year were elevated by several large mergers, which left their imprint on other parts of the capital account as well. In the past two years, many of the largest mergers have been financed by a swap of equity in the foreign acquiring firm for equity in the U.S. firm being acquired. The Bureau of Economic Analysis estimates that U.S. residents acquired more than $100 billion of foreign equity through this mechanism in the first three quarters of 1999. Separate data on market transactions indicate that U.S. residents made net purchases of Japanese equities. They also sold European equities, probably in an attempt to rebalance portfolios in light of the equity acquired through stock swaps. U.S. residents on net purchased a small volume of foreign bonds in 1999. U.S. direct investment in foreign economies also reflected the global wave of merger activity in 1999 and will likely total something near its record level of 1998.

Available data indicate a return to sizable capital inflows from foreign official sources in 1999, following a modest outflow in 1998. The decline in foreign official assets in the United States in 1998 was fairly widespread, as many countries found their currencies under unwanted downward pressure during the turmoil. By contrast, the increase in foreign official reserves in the United States in 1999 was fairly concentrated in a relatively few countries that experi-

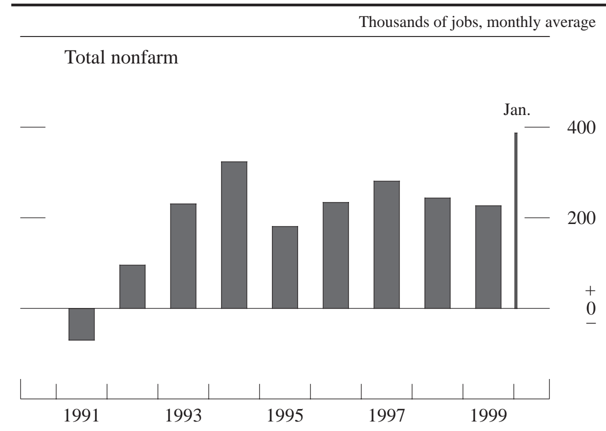
enced unwanted upward pressure on their currencies vis-à-vis the U.S. dollar.

The Labor Market

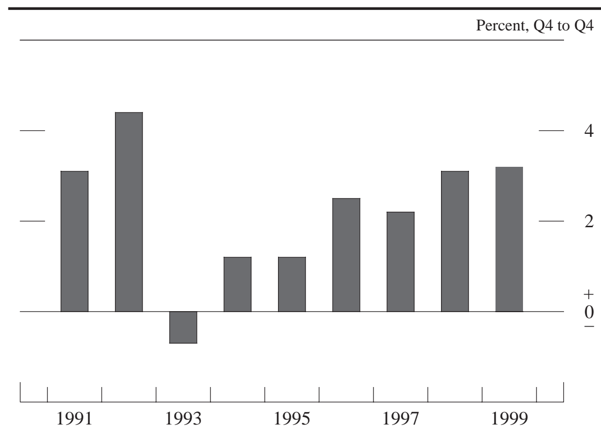
As in other recent years, the rapid growth of aggregate output in 1999 was associated with both strong growth of productivity and brisk gains in employment. According to the initial estimate for 1999, output per hour in the nonfarm business sector rose 3¼ percent over the four quarters of the year, and historical data were revised this past year to show stronger gains than previously reported in the years preceding 1999. As the data stand currently, the average rate of rise in output per hour over the past four years is about 2¾ percent—up from an average of 1½ percent from the mid-1970s to the end of 1995. Some of the step-up in productivity growth since 1995 can be traced to high levels of capital spending and an accompanying faster rate of increase in the amount of capital per worker. Beyond that, the causes are more difficult to pin down quantitatively but are apparently related to increased technological and organizational efficiencies. Firms are not only expanding the stock of capital but are also discovering many new uses for the technologies embodied in that capital, and workers are becoming more skilled at employing the new technologies.

The number of jobs on nonfarm payrolls rose slightly more than 2 percent from the end of 1998 to the end of 1999, a net increase of 2.7 million. Annual job gains had ranged between 2¼ percent and 2¾ percent over the 1996–98 period. Once again in 1999, the private service-producing sector accounted for most of the total rise in payroll employment, led by many of the same categories that had been strong in previous years—transportation and communications, computer services, engineering and management, recreation, and personnel supply. In the construction sector, employment growth remained quite brisk—more than 4 percent from the final quarter of 1998 to the final quarter of 1999. Manufacturing employment, influenced by spillover from the disruptions in foreign economies, continued to decline sharply in the first half of the year, but losses thereafter were small as factory production strengthened. Since the start of the expansion in 1991, the job count in manufacturing has changed little, on net, but with factory productivity rising rapidly, manufacturing output has trended up at a brisk pace.

Change in payroll employment

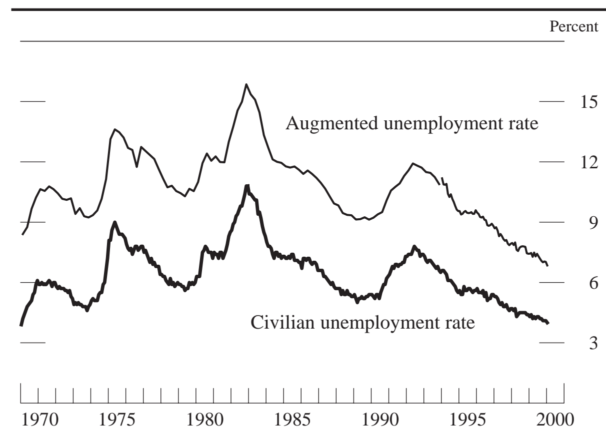


Change in output per hour



NOTE. Nonfarm business sector.

Measures of labor utilization

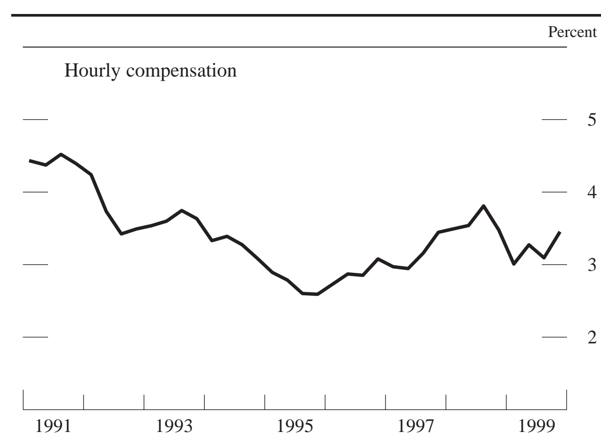


NOTE. The augmented unemployment rate is the number of unemployed plus those who are not in the labor force and want a job, divided by the civilian labor force plus those who are not in the labor force and want a job. The break in data at January 1994 marks the introduction of a redesigned survey; data from that point on are not directly comparable with those of earlier periods. The data extend through January 2000.

In 1999, employers continued to face a tight labor market. Some increase in the workforce came from the pool of the unemployed, and the jobless rate declined to an average of 4.1 percent in the fourth quarter. In January 2000, the rate edged down to 4.0 percent, the lowest monthly reading since the start of the 1970s. Because the unemployment rate is a reflection only of the number of persons who are available for work and actively looking, it does not capture potential labor supply that is one step removed—namely those individuals who are interested in working but are not actively seeking work at the current time. However, like the unemployment rate itself, an augmented rate that includes these interested nonparticipants also has declined to a low level, as more individuals have taken advantage of expanding opportunities to work.

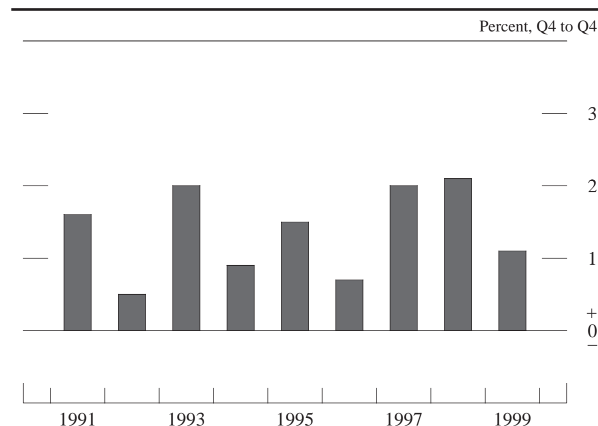
Although the supply–demand balance in the labor market tightened further in 1999, the added pressure did not translate into bigger increases in nominal hourly compensation. The employment cost index for hourly compensation of workers in private nonfarm industries rose 3.4 percent in nominal terms during 1999, little changed from the increase of the previous year, and an alternative measure of hourly compensation from the nonfarm productivity and cost data slowed from a 5¼ percent increase in 1998 to a 4½ percent rise this past year. Compensation gains in 1999 probably were influenced, in part, by the very low inflation rate of 1998, which resulted in unexpectedly large increases in inflation-adjusted pay in that year and probably damped wage increments last year. According to the employment cost index, the hourly wages of workers in private industry rose 3½ percent in nominal terms after having increased about 4 percent in each of the two previous years. The hourly cost to employers of the nonwage benefits provided to employees also rose 3½ percent in 1999, but this increase was considerably larger than those of the past few years. Much of the pickup in benefit costs came from a faster rate of rise in the costs of health insurance, which were reportedly driven up by several factors: a moderate acceleration in the price of medical care, the efforts of some insurers to rebuild profit margins, and the recognition by employers that an attractive health benefits package was helpful in hiring and retaining workers in a tight labor market.

Change in employment cost index



Note. Change from one year earlier. Private industry, excluding farm and household workers. Data extend through December 1999.

Change in unit labor costs



Note. Nonfarm business sector.

Because the employment cost index does not capture some forms of compensation that employers have been using more extensively—for example, stock options, signing bonuses, and employee price discounts on in-store purchases—it has likely been understating the true size of workers' gains. The productivity and cost measure of hourly compensation captures at least some of the labor costs that the employment cost index omits, and this broader coverage may explain why the productivity and cost measure has been rising faster. However, it, too, is affected by problems of measurement, some of which would lead to overstatement of the rate of rise in hourly compensation.

With the rise in output per hour in the nonfarm business sector in 1999 offsetting about three-fourths of the rise in the productivity and cost measure of nominal hourly compensation, nonfarm unit labor costs were up just a shade more than 1 percent. Unit labor costs had increased slightly more than 2 percent in both 1997 and 1998 and less than 1 percent in 1996. Because labor costs are by far the most important item in total unit costs, these small increases have been crucial to keeping inflation low.

3. Alternative measures of price change
Percent

Price measure	1998	1999
Chain-type		
Gross domestic product	1.1	1.6
Gross domestic purchases	.7	1.9
Personal consumption expenditures	1.0	2.0
Excluding food and energy	1.4	1.5
Fixed-weight		
Consumer price index	1.5	2.6
Excluding food and energy	2.3	2.0

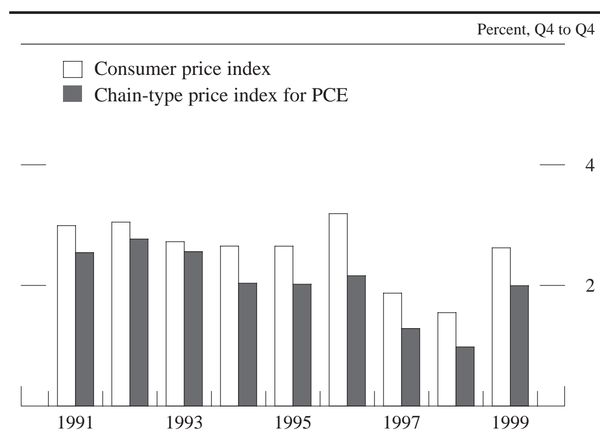
NOTE. Changes are based on quarterly averages and are measured to the fourth quarter of the year indicated from the fourth quarter of the preceding year.

Prices

Rates of increase in the broader measures of aggregate prices in 1999 were somewhat larger than those of 1998. The chain-type price index for GDP—which measures inflation for goods and services *produced* domestically—moved up about 1½ percent, a pickup of ½ percentage point from the increase of 1998. In comparison, acceleration in various price measures for goods and services *purchased* amounted to 1 percentage point or more: The chain-type price index for personal consumption expenditures increased 2 percent, twice as much as in the previous year, and the chain-type price index for gross domestic purchases, which measures prices of the aggregate purchases of consumers, businesses, and governments, moved up close to 2 percent after an increase of just ¾ percent in 1998. The consumer price index rose more than 2½ percent over the four quarters of the year after having increased 1½ percent in 1998.

The acceleration in the prices of goods and services purchased was driven in part by a reversal in import prices. In 1998, the chain-type price index for imports of goods and services had fallen 5 percent, but it rose 3 percent in 1999. A big swing in oil prices—down in 1998 but up sharply in 1999—accounted for a large part of this turnaround. Excluding oil, the prices of imported goods continued to fall in 1999 but, according to the initial estimate, less rapidly than over the three previous years, when downward pressure from appreciation of the dollar had been considerable. The prices of imported materials and supplies rebounded, but the prices of imported capital goods fell sharply further. Meanwhile, the chain-type price index for exports increased 1 percent in the latest year, reversing a portion of the 2½ percent drop of 1998, when the sluggishness of foreign economies and the strength of the dollar had pressured U.S. producers to mark down the prices charged to foreign buyers.

Change in consumer prices



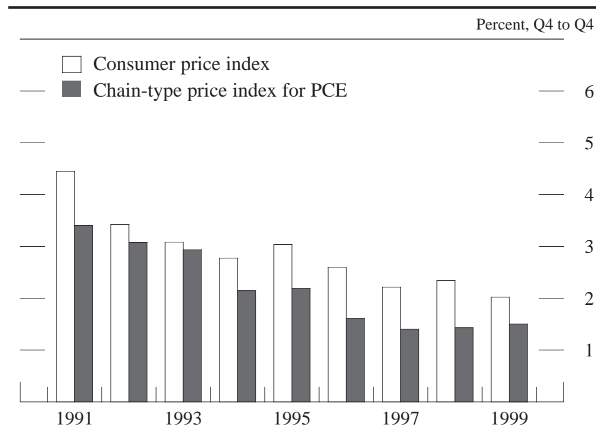
NOTE. Consumer price index for all urban consumers.

Prices of domestically produced primary materials, which tend to be especially sensitive to developments in world markets, rebounded sharply in 1999. The producer price index for crude materials excluding food and energy advanced about 10 percent after having fallen about 15 percent in 1998, and the PPI for intermediate materials excluding food and energy increased about 1½ percent, reversing a 1998 decline of about that same size. But further along in the chain of processing and distribution, the effects of these increases were not very visible. The producer price index for finished goods excluding food and energy rose slightly less rapidly in 1999 than in 1998, and the consumer price index for goods excluding food and energy rose at about the same low rate that it had in 1998. Large gains in productivity and a margin of excess capacity in the industrial sector helped keep prices of goods in check, even as growth of domestic demand remained exceptionally strong.

"Core" inflation at the consumer level—which takes account of the prices of services as well as the prices of goods and excludes food and energy prices—changed little in 1999. The increase in the core index for personal consumption expenditures, 1½ percent over the four quarters of the year, was about the same as the increase in 1998. As measured by the CPI, core inflation was 2 percent this past year, about ¼ percentage point lower than in 1998, but the deceleration was a reflection of a change in CPI methodology that had taken place at the start of last year; on a methodologically consistent basis, the rise in the core CPI was about the same in both years.

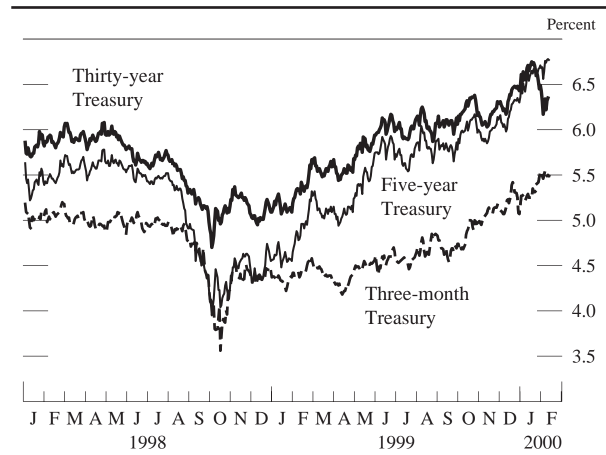
In the national accounts, the chain-type price index for private fixed investment edged up ¼ percent in 1999 after having fallen about ¾ percent in 1998. With construction costs rising, the index for residential investment increased 3¾ percent, its largest advance in several years. By contrast, the price index

Change in consumer prices excluding food and energy



NOTE. Consumer price index for all urban consumers.

Selected Treasury rates, daily data



NOTE. Last observations are for February 11, 2000.

for nonresidential investment declined moderately, as a result of another drop in the index for equipment and software. Falling equipment prices are one channel through which faster productivity gains have been reshaping the economy in recent years; the drop in prices has contributed to high levels of investment, rapid expansion of the capital stock, and a step-up in the growth of potential output.

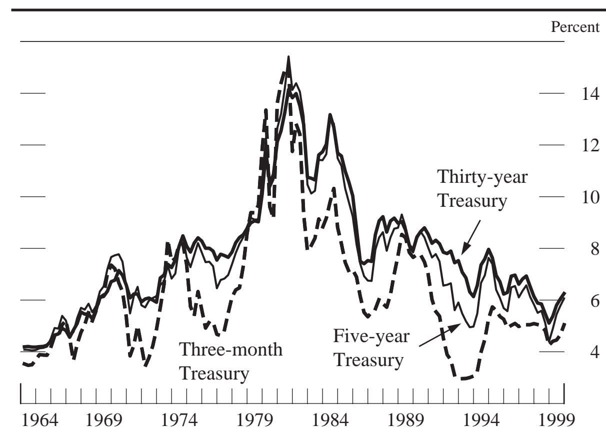
U.S. Financial Markets

Financial markets were somewhat unsettled as 1999 began, with the disruptions of the previous autumn still unwinding and the devaluation of the Brazilian *real* causing some jitters around mid-January. However, market conditions improved into the spring, evidenced in part by increased trading volumes and narrowed bid–asked and credit spreads, as it became increasingly evident that strong growth was continuing in the United States, and that economies abroad were rebounding. In this environment, market participants began to anticipate that the Federal Reserve would reverse the policy easings of the preceding fall, and interest rates rose. Nevertheless, improved profit expectations apparently more than offset the interest rate increases, and equity prices continued to climb until late spring. From May into the fall, both equity prices and longer-term interest rates moved in a choppy fashion, while short-term interest rates moved up with monetary policy tightenings in June, August, and November. Worries about Y2K became pronounced after midyear, and expectations of an acceleration of borrowing ahead of the fourth quarter prompted a resurgence in liquidity and credit premiums. In the closing months of the year, however, the likelihood of outsized demands for credit and liquidity over the year-end subsided, causing spreads to narrow, and stock prices surged once again. After the century date change passed without disruptions, liquidity improved and trading volumes grew, although both bond and equity prices have remained quite volatile so far this year.

Interest Rates

Over the first few months of 1999, short-term Treasury rates moved in a narrow range, anchored by an unchanged stance of monetary policy. Yields on intermediate- and long-term Treasury securities rose, however, as the flight to quality and liquidity of the preceding fall unwound, and incoming data pointed

Selected Treasury rates, quarterly data



NOTE. The twenty-year Treasury bond rate is shown until the first issuance of the thirty-year Treasury bond in February 1977. The data extend through the fourth quarter of 1999.

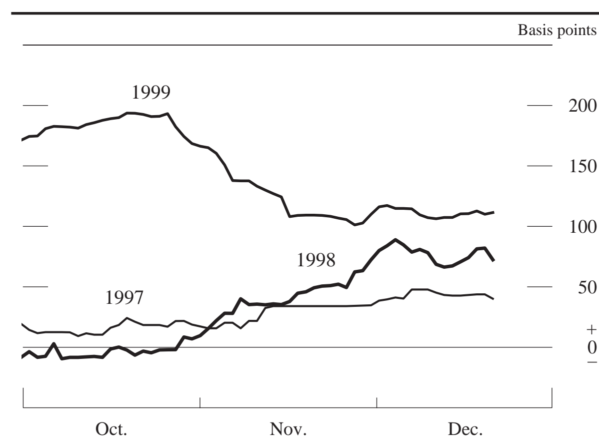
to continued robust economic growth and likely Federal Reserve tightening. Over most of the rest of the year, short-term Treasury rates moved broadly in line with the three quarter-point increases in the target federal funds rate; longer-term yields rose less, as markets had already anticipated some of those policy actions.

Bond and note yields moved sharply higher from early November 1999 to mid-January 2000, as Y2K fears diminished, incoming data indicated surprising economic vitality, and the century date change was negotiated without significant technical problems. In recent weeks, long-term Treasury yields have retraced a good portion of that rise on expectations of reduced supply stemming from the Treasury's new buyback program and reductions in the amount of bonds to be auctioned. This rally has been mostly confined to the long end of the Treasury market; long-term corporate bond yields have fallen only slightly, and yields are largely unchanged or have risen a little further at maturities of ten years or less, where most private borrowing is concentrated.

Concerns about liquidity and credit risk around the century date change led to large premiums in private money market rates in the second half of 1999. During the summer, this ''safe haven'' demand held down rates on Treasury bills maturing early in the new year, until the announcement in August that the Treasury was targeting an unusually large year-end cash balance, implying that it would issue a substantial volume of January-dated cash management bills. Year-end premiums in eurodollar, commercial paper, term federal funds, and other money markets—measured as the implied forward rate for a monthlong period spanning the turn relative to the rate for a neighboring period—rose earlier and reached much higher levels than in recent years.

Those year-end premiums peaked in late October and then declined substantially, as markets reflected increased confidence in technical readiness and special assurances from central banks that sufficient liquidity would be available around the century date change. Important among these assurances were several of the Federal Reserve initiatives described in the first section of this report. Securities dealers took particular advantage of the widened pools of acceptable collateral for open market operations and used large volumes of federal agency debt and mortgage-backed securities in repurchase agreements with the Open Market Desk in the closing weeks of the year, which helped to relieve a potential scarcity of Treasury collateral over the turn. Market participants also purchased options on nearly $500 billion worth of repurchase agreements under the standby financing facility and pledged more than $650 billion of collateral for borrowing at the discount window. With the smooth rollover, however, none of the RP options were exercised, and borrowing at the discount window turned out to be fairly light.

Eurodollar deposit forward premium over year-end

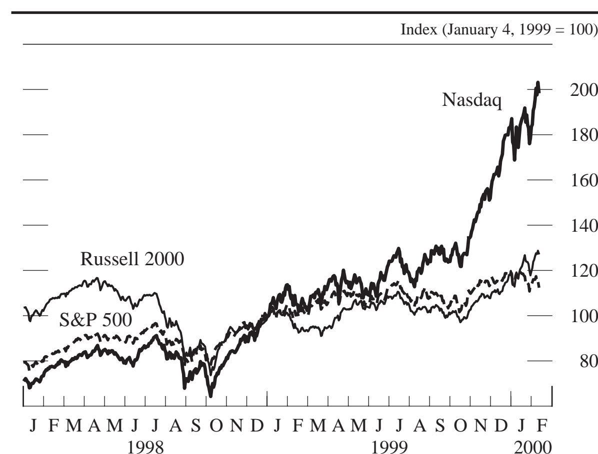


NOTE. The data are daily. For October the forward premiums are one-month forward rates two months ahead less one-month forward rates one month ahead; for November they are one-month forward rates one month ahead less one-month deposit rates; and for December they are three-week forward rates one week ahead less one-week deposit rates. The December forward premiums extend into the third week of December.

Equity Prices

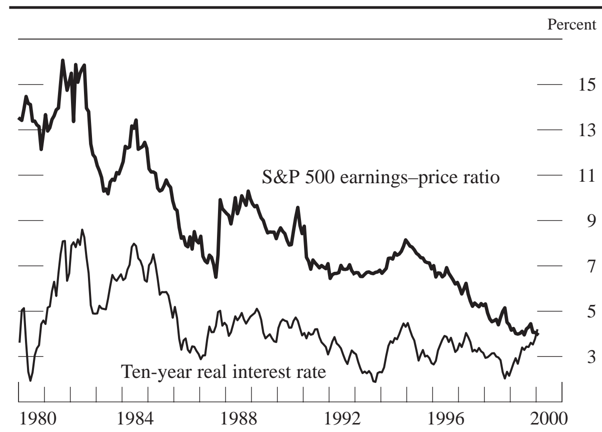
Nearly all major stock indexes ended 1999 in record territory. The Nasdaq composite index paced the advance by soaring 86 percent over the year, and the S&P 500 and Dow Jones Industrial Average posted still-impressive gains of 20 percent and 25 percent.

Major stock price indexes



NOTE. The data are daily. Last observations are for February 11, 2000.

Equity valuation and long-term real interest rate



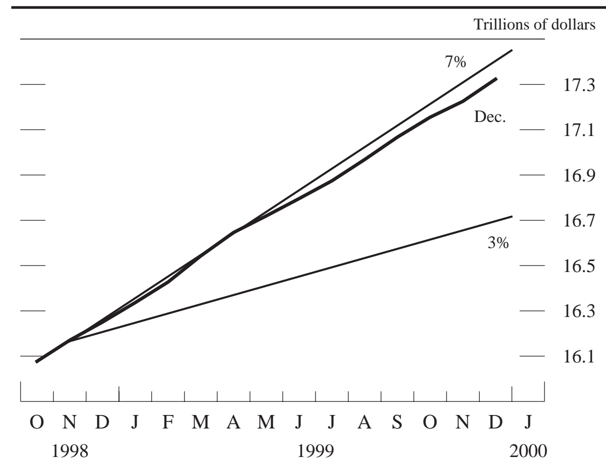
NOTE. The data are monthly and extend through January 2000. The earnings–price ratio is based on the I/B/E/S International, Inc., consensus estimate of earnings over the coming twelve months. The real interest rate is the yield on the ten-year Treasury note less the ten-year inflation expectations from the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia Survey of Professional Forecasters.

Last year was the fifth consecutive year that all three indexes posted double-digit returns. Most stock indexes moved up sharply over the first few months of the year and were about flat on net from May through August; they then declined into October before surging in the final months of the year. The Nasdaq index, in particular, achieved most of its annual gains in November and December. Stock price advances in 1999 were not very broad-based, however: More than half of the S&P 500 issues lost value over the year. So far in 2000, stock prices have been volatile and mixed; major indexes currently span a range from the Dow's nearly 10 percent drop to the Nasdaq's 8 percent advance.

Almost all key industry groups performed well. One exception was shares of financial firms, which were flat, on balance. Investor perceptions that rising interest rates would hurt earnings and, possibly, concern over loan quality apparently offset the boost resulting from passage in the fall of legislation reforming the depression-era Glass–Steagall constraints on combining commercial banking with insurance and investment banking. Small-cap stocks, which had lagged in 1998, also performed well; the Russell 2000 index climbed 20 percent over the year and finally surpassed its April 1998 peak in late December.

At large firms, stock price gains about kept pace with expected earnings growth in 1999, and the S&P 500 one-year-ahead earnings–price ratio fluctuated around the historically low level of 4 percent even as real interest rates rose. Meanwhile, the Nasdaq composite index's earnings–price ratio (using actual twelve-month trailing earnings) plummeted from an already-slim 1¼ percent to ½ percent, suggesting that investors are pricing in expectations of tremendous earnings growth at technology firms relative to historical norms.

Domestic nonfinancial debt: Annual range and actual level

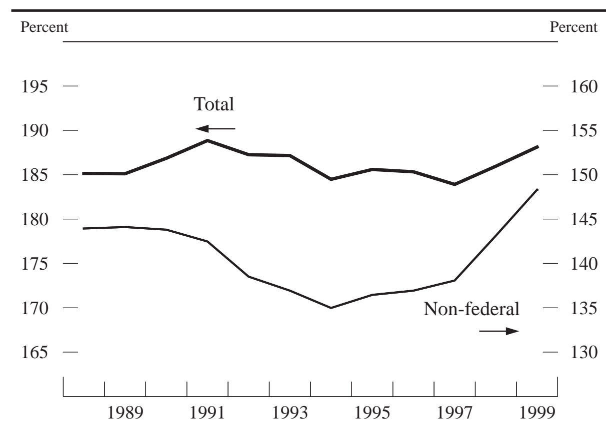


Debt and the Monetary Aggregates

Debt and Depository Intermediation

The debt of domestic nonfinancial sectors is estimated to have grown 6½ percent in 1999 on a fourth-quarter-to-fourth-quarter basis, near the upper end of the FOMC's 3 percent to 7 percent range and about a percentage point faster than nominal GDP. As was the case in 1998, robust outlays on consumer durable goods, housing, and business investment, as well as substantial net equity retirements, helped sustain nonfederal sector debt growth at rates above

Domestic nonfinancial debt as a percentage of nominal GDP

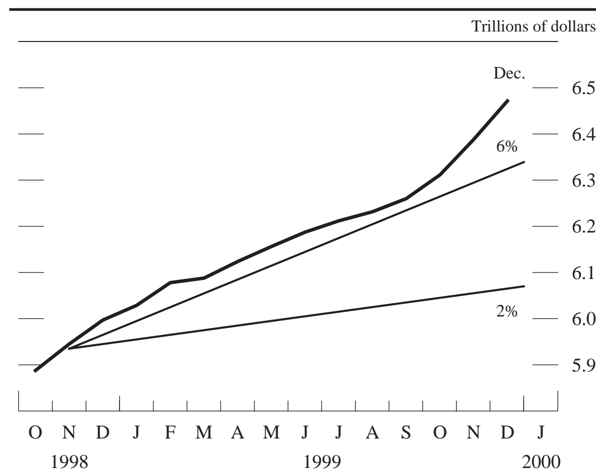


NOTE. The data are annual.

9 percent. Meanwhile, the dramatically increased federal budget surplus allowed the Treasury to reduce its outstanding debt about 2 percent. These movements follow the pattern of recent years whereby increases in the debt of households, businesses, and state and local governments relative to GDP have come close to matching declines in the federal government share, consistent with reduced pressure on available savings from the federal sector facilitating private borrowing.

After increasing for several years, the share of total credit accounted for by depository institutions leveled out in 1999. Growth in credit extended by those institutions edged down to 6½ percent from 6¾ percent in 1998. Adjusted for mark-to-market accounting rules, bank credit growth retreated from 10¼ percent in 1998 to 5½ percent last year, with a considerable portion of the slowdown attributable to an unwinding of the surge in holdings of non-U.S. government securities, business loans, and security loans that had been built up during the market disruptions in the fall of 1998. Real estate loans constituted one of the few categories of bank credit that accelerated in 1999. By contrast, thrift credit swelled 9 percent, up from a 4½ percent gain in 1998, as rising mortgage interest rates led borrowers to opt more frequently for adjustable-rate mortgages, which thrifts tend to keep on their books. The trend toward securitization of consumer loans continued in 1999: Bank originations of consumer loans were up about 5 percent, while holdings ran off at a 1¾ percent pace.

M3: Annual range and actual level



The Monetary Aggregates

Growth of the broad monetary aggregates moderated significantly last year. Nevertheless, as was expected by the FOMC last February and July, both M2 and M3 finished the year above their annual price-stability ranges. M3 rose 7½ percent in 1999, somewhat outside the Committee's range of 2 percent to 6 percent but far below the nearly 11 percent pace of 1998. M3 growth retreated early in 1999, as the surge in depository credit in the final quarter of 1998 unwound and depository institutions curbed their issuance of the managed liabilities included in that aggregate. At that time, the expansion of

4. Growth of money and debt
Percent

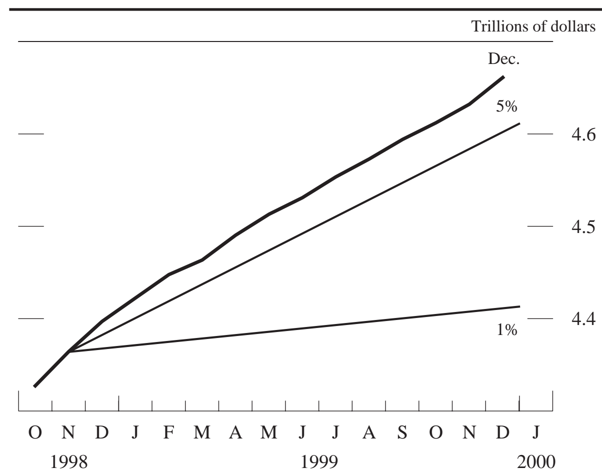
Period	M1	M2	M3	Domestic nonfinancial debt
Annual[1]				
1989	.6	5.2	4.1	7.4
1990	4.2	4.2	1.9	6.7
1991	7.9	3.1	1.1	4.5
1992	14.4	1.8	.6	4.5
1993	10.6	1.4	1.0	4.9
1994	2.5	.6	1.7	4.9
1995	−1.5	3.9	6.1	5.5
1996	−4.5	4.5	6.8	5.4
1997	−1.2	5.6	8.9	5.2
1998	2.2	8.5	10.9	6.7
1999	1.9	6.2	7.5	6.6
Quarterly (annual rate)[2]				
1999:1	1.9	7.5	8.2	6.7
2	2.2	6.0	6.0	6.9
3	−2.0	5.5	5.1	6.0
4	5.3	5.4	10.0	6.2

NOTE. M1 consists of currency, travelers checks, demand deposits, and other checkable deposits. M2 consists of M1 plus savings deposits (including money market deposit accounts), small-denomination time deposits, and balances in retail money market funds. M3 consists of M2 plus large-denomination time deposits, balances in institutional money market funds, RP liabilities (overnight and term), and eurodollars (overnight and term). Debt consists of the outstanding credit market debt of the U.S. government, state and local governments, households and nonprofit organizations, nonfinancial businesses, and farms.

1. From average for fourth quarter of preceding year to average for fourth quarter of year indicated.

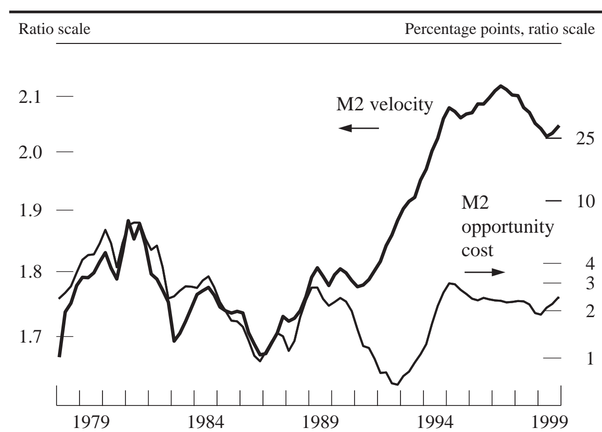
2. From average for preceding quarter to average for quarter indicated.

M2: Annual range and actual level



institution-only money funds also slowed with the ebbing of heightened preferences for liquid assets. However, M3 bulged again in the fourth quarter of 1999, as loan growth picked up and banks funded the increase mainly with large time deposits and other managed liabilities in M3. U.S. branches and agencies of foreign banks stepped up issuance of large certificates of deposit, in part to augment the liquidity of their head offices over the century date change, apparently because it was cheaper to fund in U.S. markets. Domestic banks needed the additional funding because of strong loan growth and a buildup in vault cash for Y2K contingencies. Corporations apparently built up year-end precautionary liquidity in institution-only money funds, which provided a further boost to M3 late

M2 velocity and the opportunity cost of holding M2



NOTE. The data are quarterly and extend through 1999:Q4. The velocity of M2 is the ratio of nominal gross domestic product to the stock of M2. The opportunity cost of M2 is a two-quarter moving average of the difference between the three-month Treasury bill rate and the weighted average return on assets included in M2.

in the year. Early in 2000, these effects began to unwind.

M2 increased 6¼ percent in 1999, somewhat above the FOMC's range of 1 percent to 5 percent. Both the easing of elevated demands for liquid assets that had boosted M2 in the fourth quarter of 1998 and a rise in its opportunity cost (the difference between interest rates on short-term market instruments and the rates available on M2 assets) tended to bring down M2 growth in 1999. That rise in opportunity cost also helped to halt the decline in M2 velocity that had begun in mid-1997, although the 1¾ percent (annual rate) rise in velocity over the second half of 1999 was not enough to offset the drop in the first half of the year. Within M2, currency demand grew briskly over the year as a whole, reflecting booming retail sales and, late in the year, some precautionary buildup for Y2K. Money stock currency grew at an annualized rate of 28 percent in December and then ran off in the weeks after the turn of the year.

In anticipation of a surge in the public's demand for currency, depository institutions vastly expanded their holdings of vault cash, beginning in the fall to avoid potential constraints in the ability of the armored car industry to accommodate large currency shipments late in the year. Depositories' cash drawings reduced their Federal Reserve balances and drained substantial volumes of reserves, and, in mid-December, large precautionary increases in the Treasury's cash balance and in foreign central banks' liquid investments at the Federal Reserve did as well. The magnitude of these flows was largely anticipated by the System, and, to replace the lost reserves, during the fourth quarter the Desk entered into a number of longer-maturity repurchase agreements timed to mature early in 2000. The Desk also executed a large number of short-term repurchase transactions for over the turn of the year, including some in the forward market, to provide sufficient reserves and support market liquidity.

The public's demand for currency through year-end, though appreciable, remained well below the level for which the banking system was prepared, and vault cash at the beginning of January stood about $38 billion above its year-ago level. This excess vault cash, and other century date change effects in money and reserve markets, unwound quickly after the smooth transition into the new year.

International Developments

Global economic conditions improved in 1999 after a year of depressed growth and heightened financial

market instability. Financial markets in developing countries, which had been hit hard by crises in Asia and Russia in recent years, recovered last year. The pace of activity in developing countries increased, with Asian emerging-market economies in particular bouncing back strongly from the output declines of the preceding year. Real growth improved in almost all the major industrial economies as well. This strengthening of activity contributed to a general rise in equity prices and a widespread increase in interest rates. Despite stronger activity and higher prices for oil and other commodities, average foreign inflation was lower in 1999 than in 1998, as output remained below potential in most countries.

Although the general theme in emerging financial markets in 1999 was a return to stability, the year began with heightened tension as a result of a financial crisis in Brazil. With the effects of the August 1998 collapse of the ruble and the default on Russian government debt still reverberating, Brazil was forced to abandon its exchange-rate-based stabilization program in January 1999. The *real*, allowed to float, soon fell nearly 50 percent against the dollar, generating fears of a depreciation–inflation spiral that could return Brazil to its high-inflation past. In addition, there were concerns that the government might default on its domestic-currency and dollar-indexed debt, the latter totaling more than $50 billion. In the event, these fears proved unfounded. The turning point appears to have come in March when a new central bank governor announced that fighting inflation was a top priority and interest rates were substantially raised to support the *real*. Over the remainder of the year, Brazilian financial markets stabilized on balance, despite continuing concerns about the government's ability to reduce the fiscal deficit. Inflation, although accelerating from the previous year, remained under 10 percent. Brazilian economic activity also recovered somewhat in 1999, after declining in 1998, as the return of confidence allowed officials to lower short-term interest rates substantially from their crisis-related peak levels of early in the year.

The Brazilian crisis triggered some renewed financial stress in other Latin American economies, and domestic interest rates and Brady bond yield spreads increased sharply from levels already elevated by the Russian crisis. However, as the situation in Brazil improved, financial conditions in the rest of the region stabilized relatively rapidly. Even so, the combination of elevated risk premiums and diminished access to international credit markets tended to depress activity in much of the region in the first half of 1999. Probably the most strongly affected was Argentina, where the exchange rate peg to the dollar was maintained only at the cost of continued high real interest rates that contributed to the decline in real GDP in 1999. In contrast, real GDP in Mexico rose an estimated 6 percent in 1999, aided by higher oil prices and strong export growth to the United States. The peso appreciated against the dollar for the year as a whole, despite a Mexican inflation rate about 10 percentage points higher than in the United States.

The recovery of activity last year in Asian developing countries was earlier, more widespread, and sharper than in Latin America, just as the downturn had been the previous year. After a steep drop in activity in the immediate wake of the financial crises that hit several Asian emerging-market economies in late 1997, the preconditions for a revival in activity were set by measures initiated to stabilize shaky financial markets and banking sectors, often in conjunction with International Monetary Fund programs that provided financial support. Once financial conditions had been stabilized, monetary policies turned accommodative in 1998, and this stimulus, along with the shift toward fiscal deficits and an ongoing boost to net exports provided by the sharp depreciations of their currencies, laid the foundation for last year's strong revival in activity. Korea's recovery was the most robust, with real GDP estimated to have increased more than 10 percent in 1999 after falling 5 percent the previous year. The government continued to make progress toward needed financial and corporate sector reform. However, significant weaknesses remained, as evidenced by the near collapse of Daewoo, Korea's second largest conglomerate. Other Asian developing countries that experienced financial difficulties in late 1997 (Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines) also recorded increases in real GDP in 1999 after declines the previous year. Indonesian financial markets were buffeted severely at times during 1999 by concerns about political instability, but the rupiah ended the year with a modest net appreciation against the dollar. The other former crisis countries also saw their currencies stabilize or slightly appreciate against the dollar. Inflation rates in these countries generally declined, despite the pickup in activity and higher prices for oil and other commodities. Inflation was held down by the elevated, if diminishing, levels of excess capacity and unemployment and by a waning of the inflationary impact of previous exchange rate depreciations.

In China, real growth slowed moderately in 1999. Given China's exchange rate peg to the dollar, the sizable depreciations elsewhere in Asia in 1997 and 1998 led to a sharp appreciation of China's real effective exchange rate, and there was speculation

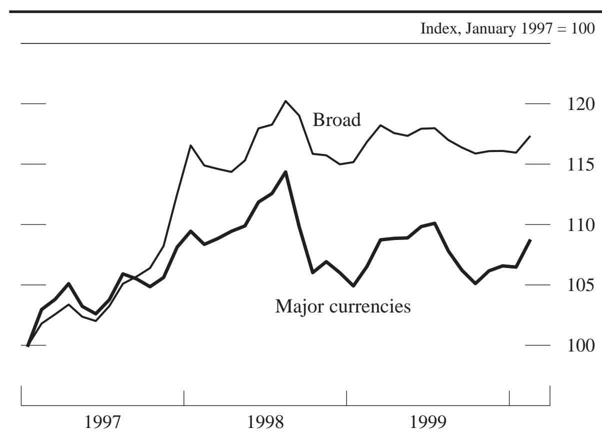
last year that the renminbi might be devalued. However, with China's trade balance continuing in substantial, though reduced, surplus, Chinese officials maintained the exchange rate peg to the dollar last year and stated their intention of extending it through at least this year. After the onset of the Asian financial crisis, continuance of Hong Kong's currency-board-maintained peg to the U.S. dollar was also questioned. In the event, the tie to the dollar was sustained, but only at the cost of high real interest rates, which contributed to a decrease in output in Hong Kong in 1998 and early 1999 and a decline of consumer prices over this period. However, real GDP started to move up again later in the year, reflecting in part the strong revival of activity in the rest of Asia.

In Russia, economic activity increased last year despite persistent and severe structural problems. Real GDP, which had dropped nearly 10 percent in 1998 as a result of the domestic financial crisis, recovered about half the loss last year. Net exports rose strongly, boosted by the lagged effect of the substantial real depreciation of the ruble in late 1998 and by higher oil prices. The inflation rate moderated to about 50 percent, somewhat greater than the depreciation of the ruble over the course of the year.

The dollar's average foreign exchange value, measured on a trade-weighted basis against the currencies of a broad group of important U.S. trading partners, ended 1999 little changed from its level at the beginning of the year. There appeared to be two main, roughly offsetting, pressures on the dollar last year. On the one hand, the continued very strong growth of the U.S. economy relative to foreign economies tended to support the dollar. On the other hand, the further rise in U.S. external deficits—with the U.S. current account deficit moving up toward 4 percent of GDP by the end of the year—may have tended to hold down the dollar because of investor concerns that the associated strong net demand for dollar assets might prove unsustainable. So far this year, the dollar's average exchange value has increased slightly, boosted by new evidence of strong U.S. growth. Against the currencies of the major foreign industrial countries, the dollar's most notable movements in 1999 were a substantial depreciation against the Japanese yen and a significant appreciation relative to the euro.

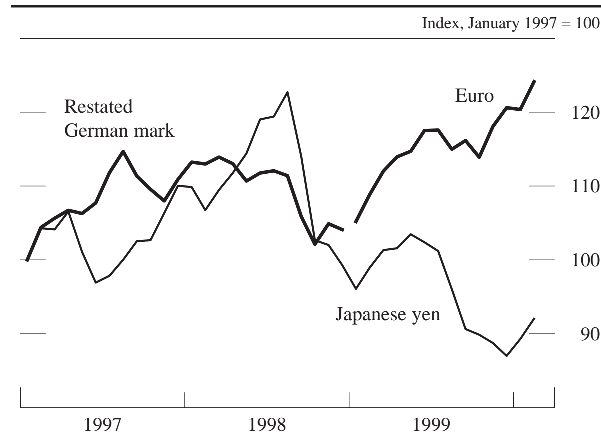
The dollar depreciated 10 percent on balance against the yen over the course of 1999. In the first half of the year, the dollar strengthened slightly relative to the yen, as growth in Japan appeared to remain sluggish and Japanese monetary authorities reduced short-term interest rates to near zero in an effort to jumpstart the economy. However, around mid-year, several signs of a revival of activity—particularly the announcement of unanticipated strong growth in real GDP in the first quarter—triggered a depreciation of the dollar relative to the yen amid reports of large inflows of foreign capital into the Japanese stock market. Data releases showing that the U.S. current account deficit had reached record levels in both the second and third quarters of the year also appeared to be associated with depreciations of the dollar against the yen. Concerned that a stronger yen could harm the fledgling recovery, Japanese monetary authorities intervened heavily to weaken the yen on numerous occasions. So far this year, the dollar has firmed

Nominal dollar exchange rate indexes



Note. The data are monthly. Indexes are trade-weighted averages of the exchange value of the dollar against major currencies and against the currencies of a broad group of important U.S. trading partners. Last observations are for the first two weeks of February 2000.

U.S. dollar exchange rate against the Japanese yen and the euro



Note. The data are monthly. Restated German mark is the dollar–mark exchange rate rescaled by the official conversion factor between the mark and the euro, 1.95583, through December 1998. Euro exchange rate as of January 1999. Last observations are for the first two weeks of February 2000.

about 7 percent against the yen. Japanese real GDP increased somewhat in 1999, following two consecutive years of decline. Growth was concentrated in the first half of the year, when domestic demand surged, led by fiscal stimulus. Later in the year, domestic demand slumped, as the pace of fiscal expansion flagged. Net exports made virtually no contribution to growth for the year as a whole. Japanese consumer prices declined slightly on balance over the course of the year.

The new European currency, the euro, came into operation at the start of 1999, marking the beginning of stage three of European economic and monetary union. The rates of exchange between the euro and the currencies of the eleven countries adopting the new currency were set at the end of 1998; based on these rates, the value of the euro at its creation was just under $1.17. From a technical perspective, the introduction of the euro went smoothly, and on its first day of trading its value moved higher. However, the euro soon started to weaken against the dollar, influenced by indications that euro-area growth would remain very slow. After approaching parity with the dollar in early July, the euro rebounded, partly on gathering signs of European recovery. However, the currency weakened again in the fall, and in early December it reached parity with the dollar, about where it closed the year. The euro's weakness late in the year was attributed in part to concerns about the pace of market-oriented structural reforms in continental Europe and to a political wrangle over the proposed imposition of a withholding tax on investment income. On balance, the dollar appreciated 16 percent relative to the euro over 1999. So far this year, the dollar has strengthened 2 percent further against the euro. Although the euro's foreign exchange value weakened in its first year of operation, the volume of euro-denominated transactions—particularly the issuance of debt securities—expanded rapidly.

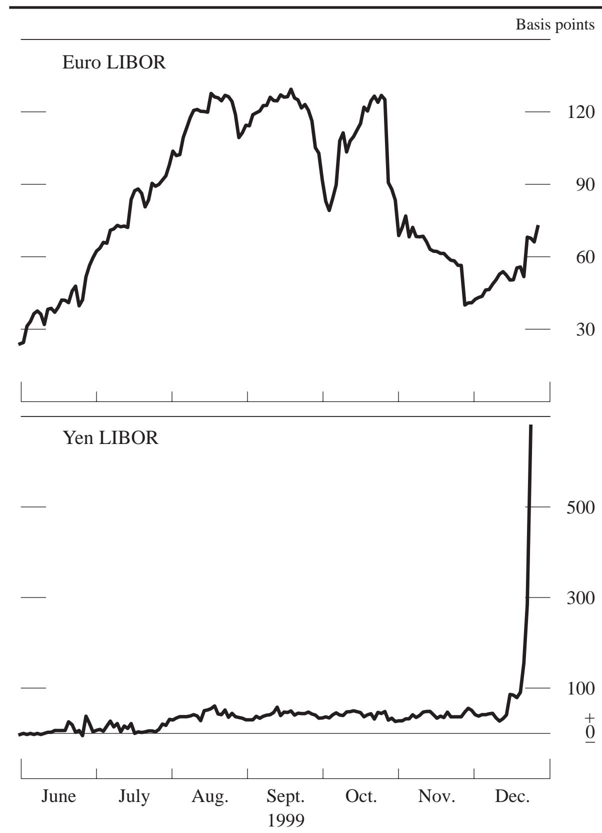
In the eleven European countries that now fix their currencies to the euro, real GDP growth remained weak early in 1999 but strengthened subsequently and averaged an estimated 3 percent rate for the year as a whole. Net exports made a significant positive contribution to growth, supported by a revival of demand in Asia and Eastern Europe and by the effects of the euro's depreciation. The areawide unemployment rate declined, albeit to a still-high rate of nearly 10 percent. In the spring, the European central bank lowered its policy rate 50 basis points, to 2½ percent. This decline was reversed later in the year in reaction to accumulating evidence of a pickup in activity, and the rate was raised an additional 25 basis points earlier this month. The euro-area inflation rate edged up in 1999, boosted by higher oil prices, but still remained below the 2 percent target ceiling.

Growth in the United Kingdom also moved higher on balance in 1999, with growth picking up over the course of the year. Along with the strengthening of global demand, the recovery was stimulated by a series of official interest rate reductions, totaling 250 basis points, undertaken by the Bank of England over the last half of 1998 and the first half of 1999. Later in 1999 and early this year, the policy rate was raised four times for a total of 100 basis points, with officials citing the need to keep inflation below its 2½ percent target level in light of the strength of consumption and the housing market and continuing tight conditions in the labor market. On balance, the dollar appreciated slightly against the pound over the course of 1999.

In Canada, real growth recovered in 1999 after slumping the previous year in response to the global slowdown and the related drop in the prices of Canadian commodity exports. Last year, strong demand from the United States spurred Canadian exports while rising consumer and business confidence supported domestic demand. In the spring, the Bank of Canada lowered its official interest rate twice for a total of 50 basis points in an effort to stimulate activity in the context of a rising Canadian dollar. This decline was reversed by 25-basis-point increases near the end of the year and earlier this month, as Canadian inflation moved above the midpoint of its target range, the pace of output growth increased, and U.S. interest rates moved higher. Over the course of 1999, the U.S. dollar depreciated 6 percent on balance against the Canadian dollar.

Concerns about liquidity and credit risk related to the century date change generated a temporary bulge in year-end premiums in money market rates in the second half of the year in some countries. For the euro, borrowing costs for short-term interbank funding over the year changeover—as measured by the interest rate implied by the forward market for a one-month loan spanning the year-end relative to the rates for neighboring months—started to rise in late summer but then reversed nearly all of this increase in late October and early November before moving up more moderately in December. The sharp October-November decline in the year-changeover funding premium came in response to a series of announcements by major central banks that outlined and clarified the measures these institutions were prepared to undertake to alleviate potential liquidity problems related to the century date change. For yen

Forward premium for deposits over year-end

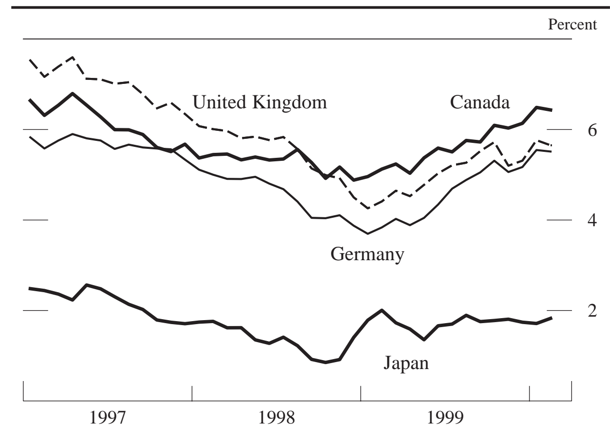


Note. The data are daily. Year-end premium measured by the interest rate on a one-month instrument spanning the year-end relative to the rates for neighboring months. Last observation is for December 29, 1999.

funding, the century date change premium moved in a different pattern, fluctuating around a relatively low level before spiking sharply for several days just before the year-end. The late-December jump in the yen funding premium was partly in response to date change-related illiquidity in the Japanese government bond repo market that emerged in early December and persisted into early January. To counter these conditions, toward the end of the year the Bank of Japan infused huge amounts of liquidity into its domestic banking system, which soon brought short-term yen funding costs back down to near zero.

Bond yields in the major foreign industrial countries generally moved higher on balance in 1999. Long-term interest rates were boosted by mounting evidence that economic recovery was taking hold abroad and by rising expectations of monetary tightening in the United States and, later, in other industrial countries. Over the course of the year, long-term interest rates increased on balance by more than 100 basis points in nearly all the major industrial countries. The notable exception was Japan, where long-term rates were little changed.

Foreign ten-year interest rates

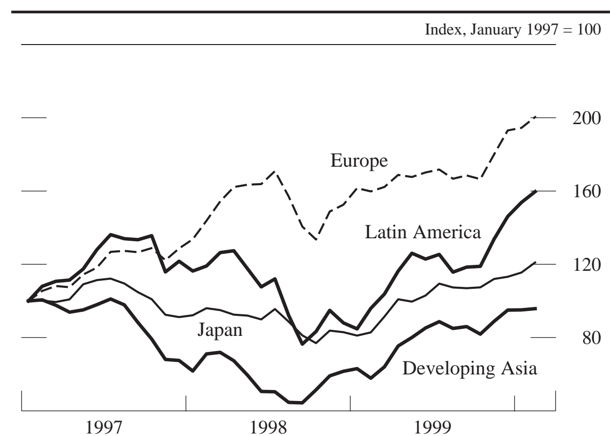


Note. The data are monthly. Last observation is for the first two weeks of February 2000.

Equity prices showed strong and widespread increases in 1999, as the pace of global activity quickened and the threat from emerging-market financial crises appeared to recede. In the industrial countries equity prices on average rose sharply, extending the general upward trend of recent years. The average percentage increase of equity prices in developing countries was even larger, as prices recovered from their crisis-related declines of the previous year. The fact that emerging Latin American and Asian equity markets outperformed those in industrial countries lends some support to the view that global investors increased their risk tolerance, especially during the last months of the year.

Oil prices increased dramatically during 1999, fully reversing the declines in the previous two years. The average spot price for West Texas intermediate, the

Foreign equity indexes



Note. The data are monthly. Last observation is for the first two weeks of February 2000.

U.S. benchmark crude, more than doubled, from around $12 per barrel at the beginning of the year to more than $26 per barrel in December. This rebound in oil prices was driven by a combination of strengthening world demand and constrained world supply. The strong U.S. economy, combined with a recovery of economic activity abroad and a somewhat more normal weather pattern, led to a 2 percent increase in world oil consumption. Oil production, on the other hand, declined 2 percent, primarily because of reduced supplies from OPEC and other key producers. Starting last spring, OPEC consistently held production near targeted levels, in marked contrast to the widespread lack of compliance that characterized earlier agreements. So far this year, oil prices have risen further on speculation over a possible extension of current OPEC production targets and the onset of unexpectedly cold weather in key consuming regions.

The price of gold fluctuated substantially in 1999. The price declined to near a twenty-year low of about $250 per ounce at mid-year as several central banks, including the Bank of England and the Swiss National Bank, announced plans to sell a sizable portion of their reserves. The September announcement that fifteen European central banks, including the two just mentioned, would limit their aggregate sales of bullion and curtail leasing activities, saw the price of gold briefly rise above $320 per ounce before turning down later in the year. Recently, the price has moved back up, to above $300 per ounce.