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*Jerry & Dave—Circa 1990*

# THE ALOOF/MATTOS REPORT

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## COVID-19 Versus American Resilience

The world continues its battle to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, which now has likely impacted, either directly or indirectly, nearly every person on Earth. This is far more than just a health crisis—this is a human crisis. Its fearful wake will only be bested by the bravery, perseverance, and hope of a determined world. It is more than just a dangerous illness, it is a test of our resolve.

Resolve requires more than just the courage to stare down the unknown—it is the commitment to overcome it. It all starts with the heroism of the first responders saving lives and scientists working tirelessly to find a cure. It shines on the truck drivers and market workers restocking empty store shelves. And resolve includes the sacrifices of small businesses and working Americans that are delaying the pursuit of economic growth for the temporary social distancing practices that are helping to contain this pandemic. This unified resolve will be the ultimate cure for COVID-19, but its side effects are proving to be costly: slower economic growth over the short-term, a rise in unemployed Americans, and the resulting volatility we continue to see in the markets.

The unified and massive response of governments around the globe is encouraging. In

coordinated action with central banks all over the world, our Federal Reserve (Fed) has already cut rates and announced open-ended asset purchases in a historically aggressive attempt to mitigate disruptions in financial markets and re-establish free flow of credit to consumers, businesses, and state and local governments. Fed Chair Jerome Powell stated that the US central bank stands ready to do “whatever it takes”—echoing the same words that European Central Bank President Mario Draghi said in the aftermath of the Great Recession to keep the Eurozone from unraveling. And, Congress is conducting its last negotiations on what will be at least a \$1.5 trillion fiscal stimulus package to rescue struggling businesses and impacted Americans. These monetary and fiscal policy initiatives cannot fix the problem—only scientists and doctors can do that—but they can help “fix” the recovery, by helping to make sure that as many businesses as possible are strong enough to re-start their growth engines to aid the economy as soon as this global pandemic wanes.

Nobody knows when and where this will end. But we have confidence the recovery—for our nation, our economy, and

the markets—is around the corner. We also know that the S&P 500 Index is 34% below its all-time high (as of the close March 23, 2020) from just over a month ago and is essentially pricing in the full extent of a recession (historical average is -37% in a recession). Though sell-offs are never encouraging, a bright spot is that this one resembles the severity of the market reactions during past severe pandemics. During the unusually deadly influenza outbreak of 1918, stocks dropped 33% before recovering; about 50 years later in 1969, a dangerous flu pandemic drove markets down 36%. Today, ironically another 50 years or so later, markets have declined a similar amount, which brings to mind the famous Mark Twain quote, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.”

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There are more negative storylines yet to be told in this pandemic as new cases continue to grow in the United States, concern remains elevated, and market volatility reigns. Every day, we are inundated with more and more cancellations—everything from shuttered workplaces to closed schools, cancelled graduations, and restricted public gatherings. But, our optimism for the near-term future has not been cancelled. Neither has hope. And, neither has the long-term prosperity of America, our economy, and the prospects for long-term investors to possibly participate in an eventual market recovery. Our future is not cancelled—it has been ignited with our resolve

Please stay healthy, and please contact us if you have any questions or concerns.

## **The CoronaVirus Threat**

*Special Guest Columnists:  
Brian S Webury—Chief Economist  
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Total deaths in the US from COVID19 look like they'll hit at least 3,000 by the end of March. A potentially brutal April lies ahead.

In the meantime, the measures taken to limit deaths have temporarily tanked the US economy. Initial claims for jobless benefits soared to 3.283 million per week, easily the highest ever. The prior record was 695,000 in October 1982; the highest during the Great Recession was 665,000.

Policymakers have reacted to the economic damage with massive measures. The Federal Reserve has reduced interest rates to nearly zero, has begged banks to use the discount window, embarked on unlimited quantitative easing, and is backstopping an unprecedented array of markets, including commercial paper, money markets, commercial mortgages, and municipal securities.

Meanwhile, we have a newly enacted “stimulus” bill that could total \$2 trillion, possibly more. These include IRS checks, a major expansion in unemployment benefits, as well as a broad combination of grants, loans, and loan guarantees for businesses (large and small), hospitals, schools, and state and local governments.

The federal budget deficit for this fiscal year, previously estimated by the Congressional Budget Office to be about \$1.1 trillion, could easily run around \$2.5 trillion, and that's without other major spending bills. Since World War II, the largest budget deficit relative to GDP was 9.8% in 2009; but a \$2.5 trillion deficit this year could be about 11.8% of GDP.

Of course, these monetary and fiscal measures are on top of the massive economic interference - designed to stem the virus -by governments at all levels. The longer these measures persist, the greater the risk of atrophy setting in for small business across the country, making them less able to reopen in the future. The loss of intangible capital would be enormous, the internal knowledge of how to get things done. Slower economic growth in the post-COVID19 world would be the result.

It's important that the expansion of government is not made permanent. The New Deal took annual federal spending from about 3% of GDP to about 10% of GDP (before World War II) and we never went back, or even close. Policymakers need to avoid making COVID19 an excuse for another permanent leap upward in the size of government, which would erode future living standards versus where

they would otherwise go.

Once we have a vaccine, some things have to change. Governments at all levels should consider “strategic health reserves” of masks, ventilators, respirators,... whatever is needed in an emergency, so we don't have to take drastic measures again. Our recent response should not be a periodic feature of American life.

Dr. Fauci recently said there could be 100,000 – 200,000 deaths. The mid-point would be 47 people per 100,000 residents, not much different from the number of people the US lost to the flu in early 1953, late 1957, early 1960, the peak of the 1968-69 Hong Kong Flu, or early 1976.

Those episodes didn't permanently expand government and neither should this one. In order to be better prepared in the future, we need a vibrant private sector, not a permanent expansion in government.

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