

# 1 QUESTION ONE: WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE THAT IS ACTUALLY FALSE?

## **If You Knew It Was Wrong, You Wouldn't Believe It**

It's safe to assume if you knew something was wrong, you wouldn't believe it in the first place. But in a world where so much of industry-applied craft has morphed into long-held mythologies, much of what everyone believes is false. This isn't any different from long ago, when humanity believed the world was flat and bleeding someone with leeches treated what ailed them.

Don't beat yourself up if you fall prey to false mythologies. Pretty much everyone has and does. Accept that, and you can begin gaming everyone else with greater success.

If sorting false mythology from fact were trivial, there wouldn't be so many false truths. While this isn't trivial, it isn't impossible. But it does require being skeptical about all your prior beliefs—something most humans dislike. Most humans hate self-questioning and prefer spending time convincing themselves (and others) their beliefs are right. Effectively, you can't trust any conclusion you thought you knew.

To think through false mythologies, we must first ask: Why do so many people believe things that are false? And why do false truths persist—passed down the decades as if they were fact? It comes back to the same point: People persist in believing things that are wrong because, individually, people rarely

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investigate their own beliefs, particularly when what they believe makes sense intuitively—even more so when those around them nod along.

As a society, we are often encouraged to challenge someone else's views, as in, "I know those @&%\$#! (insert either Republicans or Democrats as you choose) are full of phony views!" But we aren't trained to challenge ourselves or to question the basic nature of the universe the way an Einstein, Edison, or Newton would. Our instinct is to accept wisdom passed to us by former generations, smarter people, or both. These beliefs don't require investigation because we believe certain truths are beyond our ability to challenge. Often, that's right. I mean, if "they" can't figure it out, how can I?

Medicine is a good example. We are correctly conditioned to go to the doctor, describe symptoms, hear a diagnosis, and accept a prescription. Generally, that is good conditioning because medicine is an example of science and craft operating largely in parallel harmony. Not perfectly, because there are certainly plenty of myths among doctors—but generally because over time science modifies the craft and the craft improves. Because there are so many life examples where our conditioning serves us well, we're blind to the few areas, like capital markets, where it doesn't.

There are myriad beliefs you likely share with other investors. These beliefs have been built into decades of literature and are among the first things people learn when they start investing. They have been accepted by the biggest names around us. Who are *you* to question and challenge them?

Exactly the right person!

For example, investors categorically believe when the stock market has a high price-to-earnings ratio (P/E), it's riskier and has less upside than when it has a low P/E. Think about it casually, and it probably makes sense. A high P/E means a stock price (or even the whole market) is high—way high—compared to earnings. Get too far out on that scale, and it would seem a high P/E means a stock is vastly overpriced ... destined to fall. This belief is so widely held by so many people, seems so logical, and has been a basic tenet of investing for so long that proposing it's false will be met with overwhelming rejection, ridicule, and perhaps suggestions you're morally deficient somehow.

Yet I proved statistically more than 25 years ago the P/E, no matter its level, by itself tells you nothing about market risk or return. Statistics aside, delving heavily into theory (as we do later) teaches the P/E shouldn't tell you anything about risk or return anyway. But tell that to people, including the overwhelming bulk of people who have been trained and should know better, and they will think you're crazy—a real wack job.

The cool part comes after we accept the truth that P/Es by themselves tell you nothing about future returns—when people are freaking out, fearfully fretting over the market P/E being too high, we can play off that. Being bullish on the freakout worked time and again through the long 2010s bull market—and right into the postpandemic era. It doesn't always work because something else can knock the market down (we cover how to better see that later), but it will work much more often than not. In the same way, if the market's P/E is low and we can sense people are optimistic because of it, we might play against them also. Now, being a rote contrarian for contrarian's sake is also wrongheaded, as my 2015 book, *Beat the Crowd*, details. The key is understanding and seeking truth instead of the mythology. This is basic to the scientific approach.

Many false mythologies—like the P/E one—are accepted widely by the best and brightest minds and passed to the investing public through all forms of media. They don't inspire questioning from anyone. We have faith in them, like the pious do religious teachings, and they require no further proof. Holy! Sacred! No one questions these beliefs. No one offers dissenting analysis. If you do, you're a heathen. And because there is no dissenting opinion, society feels no need to see proof of these alleged investing truisms with statistically valid data. Myths live on.

How can so few demand hard evidence to support generally accepted investing wisdom? Why do investment decisions not get the scrutiny that car mechanics do? We should be at least as skeptical, if not more so, of the financial industry's pronouncements. To change the success (or lack thereof) you've had so far with investing, be skeptical. Be a cynic. Be the one to point out the emperor wears no clothes. Look around and assess what you and your fellow investors accept as truth. But the most important person to be skeptical of is yourself.

Long ago as I read or listened to media, I'd note things I believed were false and run off to do independent checking to prove my point. (People *love* to prove they're right.) I'd gather data and do statistical analysis to prove they were wrong and I was right; and I could prove I was right to my satisfaction pretty often. (It's amazing how often people can prove they're right to their own satisfaction—the plaintiff, judge, jury, and executioner all in one.) But later I saw the error in my ways. I should have sought assertions I believed were *true* ... and checked to see if they weren't really false.

Why?

If I believe the assertion is true, then probably so do many others, if not the overwhelming bulk of investors. Maybe everyone. And if we're all wrong,

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there's real power. If I can prove I'm wrong and most everyone else is also wrong, then I find useful information. I can bet against everyone knowingly. I've got one provable form of knowing something others don't—something efficient markets haven't pre-priced.

Suppose I believe factor X causes result Y. If I believe it, probably most other folks do, too. But if I'm wrong, most everyone else is wrong. When X happens, people will move to position for Y happening. Suppose I can learn X doesn't cause Y. That means something else is causing Y. That means after X happens, Y happens sometimes, but it's purely random to X's existence. Now when X happens, people will still move to position for Y happening, but I can position for Y not happening, and I'll be right more often than I'm wrong. (If I can figure out what actually causes Y, I can take a big step further, but we don't cover that step until Chapter 2 and Question Two.)

With our P/E notion, we can see one such perfect example. Say the market's P/E goes up—a lot. Normal investors notice and conclude risk has risen and future return is lower and position for the market sagging. Sometimes stocks won't do well, but more often than not stocks will be just peachy because the P/E by itself tells you nothing about market risk and direction.

When I see a high-P/E market and fear of it, I can position for the market rising. Sometimes, like in 2000 or 2022, it won't work. But more often, like in 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2003, 2009, most of the later 2010s, 2021, 2023, and 2024, it will. I don't expect you to believe the P/E thing right now. Right now, I expect you to believe the traditional mythology about P/Es and not even be very interested in challenging it. (We get to that later in detail.) For now, just accept in your bones if you can learn an accepted mythology is actually false, you can position against it and win more often than lose.

### Using Question One

A good way to think about successful investing is it's two-thirds not making mistakes and one-third doing something right. Hippocrates is frequently credited with the phrase, "First, do no harm," and it's a good investment principle.

To first do no harm, think about what you believe and ask yourself whether it's correct and factually accurate. Go crazy. Question everything you think you know. Most people hate doing this, which gives you a real advantage over them. As stated in this chapter's title, this is the first question: What do you believe that is actually false?

Asking Question One helps only if you are honest with yourself. Many people, particularly in investing, are constitutionally incapable of contemplating they're ever wrong. They will tell you they do well and likely hoodwink

themselves into believing it—but they don't. And they never subject themselves to reliable independent analysis. Accept this truth: You and the pundits and professionals from whom you glean information can be and probably are wrong about many basic beliefs. Me too!

Have you ever presented such a question to yourself about capital markets? Asking if what you believe is actually wrong requires introspection. As humans, we're hardwired to be overconfident. This is hardly a new development. Behavioralists argue our Stone Age ancestors had to be overconfident to hunt giant beasts each day armed merely with stone-tipped sticks. If they practiced introspection and came to the rational conclusion that tossing a flint-tipped branch at a buffalo was utter lunacy, they, their families and their communities would have starved. Overconfidence—the belief you can do something successfully when rationality would argue otherwise—is basic to human success in most fields and necessary to our successful evolution as a species. However, it hurts tremendously when it comes to capital markets. (More on this in Chapter 3.)

Just so, investors are loath to question generally accepted knowledge. If we started doing it, we might soon realize the market exists solely to humiliate us as much as it can for as long as it can for as many dollars as it can. Hence, I refer to the market by its proper name, “The Great Humiliator” (TGH for short). I've come to accept my goal is to interact with TGH without getting humiliated too much.

TGH is an equal-opportunity humiliator. It doesn't care if you're rich or poor, black or white, tall or short, male or female, amateur or an Olympian. It wants to humiliate everyone—me and you, too. To be frank, I think it wants to humiliate me more than you. You're fun to humiliate, but if you're fun, I'm more fun. I'm (probably) a more public figure than you and therefore a bigger TGH target. Think how much TGH would love to humiliate Warren Buffett! The bigger you are, the more TGH wants you. But in reality, TGH wants to get everyone and does a pretty good job at getting them all eventually. It can't be sated!

How do you, personally, give TGH the most fun? By acting on the same information everyone else has. How do you spoil the fun for TGH? By restricting actions to things you think you actually know that others don't.

Practice using Question One the same way I should have—by scanning the media for assertions you believe. Make a list of them. They can be about single stocks, whole markets, currencies. Anything. Make a list of anything influencing your decisions, whether on single stocks, asset allocation, anything.

Make note of decisions you've made not supported by data or any other information. Underneath there somewhere is something you believe—right or wrong. Be particularly wary of making a decision simply because of

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something you know others agree with. Highlight, underline, and asterisk decisions prompted by or based on common investor catechism. Ask what evidence you saw supporting these beliefs. Is there any? For most investors, there isn't much.

### Common Myths You Believe In, Too

For example, you may hold a stock with a high P/E ratio. You believe a high P/E signals an overvalued stock, so you decide to dump the stock and buy one with a lower P/E. It's a fairly rational decision you may have made countless times before, and one many people would agree is rational.

But are high P/Es bad for single stocks or the market? Have you personally checked the data? If you have asked the question, where did you find the answer? Did you look at the numbers, or did conventional wisdom or some big-name guru say so?

Take another scenario. You hold a stock that does well in rising markets but badly in falling ones—a typical, highly volatile stock. However, you know the US federal government is running a growing budget deficit—not only a deficit, but a historically high deficit like 2024's whopping \$1.83 trillion shortfall ... one that “can't go on forever.”<sup>1</sup> You know federal budget deficits left unchecked are “bad for the economy” and hence “bad for the stock market.” All that debt caused by the deficit must be paid back by future generations, and the market will reflect that sooner or later, right? The burden of the deficit has long-term rippling implications, holding down growth and earnings. The deficit has grown to such a size you know a bear market looms eventually. In that environment, your highly volatile stock would do badly. So you sell.

But how do you know high budget deficits lead to poor stock performance? Is it true? Most folks won't ask the question or check history. If they did, they would be sanguine about stocks rather than fearful. Historically, big budget deficits in America and around the world preceded materially above-average stock market returns. Don't fear deficits—it is big budget surpluses that have been soon followed by bad markets.

Maybe that doesn't make intuitive sense. Deficits must be bad and surpluses good, right? After all, the word *deficit* has the same Latin root as *deficient*—and that must be bad. Most folks won't challenge their own beliefs on these kinds of subjects. The notion that big deficits are bad is overwhelming. Few beliefs have as much broad acceptance from professionals, nonprofessionals, and folks from both ends of the political spectrum alike. A lot of this is

rooted in religion. A good way to get the proletariat on your side at a political rally is to vow to lower budget deficits. It's a crowd pleaser.

Here's a baker's dozen of general beliefs you probably hold, or at least most people do. We've already covered two:

1. High-P/E markets are riskier than low P/E markets.
2. Big government budget deficits are bad.

Let's think about some more:

1. A weak US dollar is bad for stocks.
2. Rising interest rates are bad for stocks. Falling rates are good.
3. A tax cut causes more debt, which is bad for stocks.
4. Higher oil prices are bad for stocks and the economy.
5. Stocks do well when the economy does well.
6. Stock markets do better in countries with faster-growing economies than slower ones.
7. Small stocks do better than big ones.
8. Stocks of firms that grow more do better than those that don't.
9. Cheaper stocks do better than less cheap stocks.
10. Big trade deficits are bad for stock markets.
11. America has way too much debt.

They're probably all familiar. This is just a short list—a subset of a much bigger list—of views most folks believe that are partly or wholly false. For example, the notion America is way too heavily in debt is backward. As I say that, you may be shriekingly dismissive, maybe even getting angry. It challenges your beliefs. If the statement makes you either dismissive or mad, you really need the rest of this book. The most standard reaction to someone stating your belief is wrong is to be dismissive and, if further confronted, to get mad.

Anger is a very good warning sign because anger is always, *always* about fear. Angry people usually don't know they're fearful. If you're dismissive or angry, you must question yourself to see how and why you concluded your belief was right in the first place. Was it mythology? Was it basic bias? Are you right or not? Sometimes the items in this list and others beyond it are part true and part false, depending on surrounding circumstances. (We look at all of these and more later.) But the most obvious question is: Why would you believe any of these statements?

I'd say you believe myths mostly because of two facts: (1) They sound like common sense, and people don't often challenge common sense. (2) Others agree these things are true, and people rarely challenge widely held views.

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### Let's Prove You're Either Right or Wrong (or Really, Really Wrong)

In debunking investor mythology using Question One, you will find three basic results. Either you were right all along (which may happen less frequently than you might have hoped), or you were wrong, or you were really, really wrong. Any of these outcomes is okay because it helps you invest better, later.

Let's examine more closely the instances when you're wrong. You and most of your fellow investors (amateur and professional) often believe something is causal—X happens because of Y—but in reality, there is no correlation at all. By now you're willing to embrace this possibility, or you would have stopped reading this book. The example we debunk is the aforementioned, commonly held belief high-P/E stock markets are risky with subsequent below-average returns. As previously mentioned, it turns out high-P/E markets don't foretell poor returns—not even remotely. Historically, they've led to some pretty good returns. What's more, low-P/E markets don't predict good returns, either.

### The Mythological Correlation

Forgetting for now why the P/E myth is so easy to buy into, we know people overwhelmingly believe high-P/E markets predict below-average returns and above-average risk.

But if it were true, there should be some form of high statistical correlation between the claimed cause and result. A statistician will say there can be high correlation between two things out of quirky luck with no causation. But the same statistician will argue you can't have causation without high correlation (unless you run into scientific nonlinearity, which doesn't happen in capital markets to my knowledge—but check yourself with the Three Questions when you finish with this book!). When a myth is widely accepted, low correlations will pair with a great societal effort to demonstrate, accept, and have faith in correlations that don't really exist. Humans are great at rationalizing the irrational.

Investors will root out evidence supporting their favorite myths and create justifications for their belief—factor X causes result Y—while ignoring a mountain of evidence that X doesn't cause Y at all. Now let's suppose everyone is of good intent. Still, even with the best of intentions, it's easy for people to latch onto evidence confirming their prior biases and ignore evidence contradicting their views. Looking for evidence to support a pet theory is human.

Accepting evidence to the contrary is no fun at all. This is done in varying ways. One way is to look at a particular time period verifying the false belief and ignore other periods. Another is to redefine either X or Y in a bizarre way so the statistics seemingly prove the point and then generalize afterward about X and Y without the bizarre definitions. Discoveries of data supporting popular myths become popular discoveries.

### Why High P/Es Tell You Nothing at All

A great example of redefining X or Y is the now-famous study by John Y. Campbell of Harvard and Robert J. Shiller of Yale.<sup>2</sup> Their paper didn't introduce a new idea—fear of high P/Es had been around forever. Their study merely introduced a new delivery of data confirming the view high-P/E periods are followed by below-average returns, an already widely held belief.

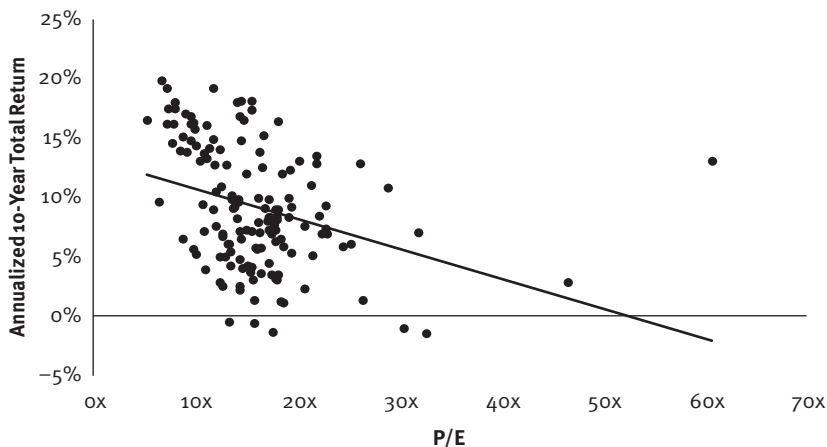
This was actually a better redo of a study they presented in 1996. But this 1998 publication got very popular, very fast because it supported what everyone already believed with new statistical documentation. Campbell and Shiller were and are noted academics. Inspired by the prior study, in 1996 Alan Greenspan first uttered the phrase “irrational exuberance” relative to the stock market, which reverberated around the world almost overnight and entered our lexicon permanently.

My friend and sometimes collaborator Meir Statman, the Glenn Klimek Professor of Finance at the Leavey School of Business at Santa Clara University, co-authored with me a paper not refuting their statistics, but reframing their approach more correctly with the same data—and you will see P/E levels aren't predictive at all. We basically asked Question One from beginning to end. Much of what follows stems from our paper “Cognitive Biases in Market Forecasts.”<sup>3</sup>

In their study, Campbell and Shiller found high P/Es acted as people always thought they did, leading to below-average returns 10 years later. First, they noted the P/E at the outset of each year and subsequent annual market returns going back to 1872, which is about as far back as we have half-tolerably reliable data. Prior to the inception of the S&P 500's data in 1926, they used Cowles data, which is an imperfect but generally accepted proxy for pre-S&P 500 years. (All old databases are imperfect. Whenever you're looking at old data, there is apt to be lots wrong with it, but the Cowles data are the best we have.) Then they graphed the data points on a scatter plot and found a slightly negative trend line.

Figure 1.1 largely re-creates their hypothesis, showing P/Es from 1872 through 2024—again using S&P 500 and Cowles data.

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**Figure 1.1 Relationship Between P/E Ratios at the Beginning of a Year and Stock Returns Over the Following Year (1872 to 2024).**

**Source:** Finaeon, Inc., as of 2/20/2025.

I've included the years since their paper (and updated through 2024) to ensure our findings are relevant today. But the same basic effect would remain if I hadn't. The negatively sloping trend line isn't the key. Clearly, the scatter points aren't particularly well grouped around the trend. The scatter plot is, well, scattered—sort of like a shotgun blast in a mild wind.

The key issue I had with the study was Campbell and Shiller based their work on an odd definition of P/E—not an intuitive one. They created a “price-smoothed earnings ratio.”<sup>4</sup> The newly defined P/E divided the price per share by the average of *real* earnings over the prior 10 years.<sup>5</sup> (*Real* means adjusted for inflation.) Fair enough, but that isn't what you think of when you think P/E, right?

But, if so, what definition of inflation would you use? I bet you would use something like the Consumer Price Index (CPI). (The CPI comes up as one of your first results when you Google “inflation.”) Yet the professors chose an esoteric wholesale price index. Not what you might default to. So instead of what you think of as P/E, they used a 10-year rolling average based on inflation adjustments based on an inflation index most wouldn't think of. Got it?

With a normally defined P/E, as you would think of it, there isn't much of a statistical fit. However, Campbell and Shiller's engineered P/E gave a result consistent with what society always believed—high P/E means low returns, high risk. And the world seemingly loved it. It has been celebrated ever since, trotted out to great fanfare whenever this “cyclically adjusted price-to-earnings ratio” is high.

In statistics, a calculation called an *R-squared* shows the relative relatedness of two variables—how much of one variable’s movement is caused by the other. (It sounds complicated, but it isn’t—Appendix A shows how to find a correlation coefficient and an R-squared.) For their study, Campbell and Shiller got an R-squared of 0.40.<sup>6</sup> An R-squared of 0.40 implies 40% of subsequent stock returns are related to the factor being compared—in this case, their reengineered P/E. Statistically, not a bad finding (although not an overwhelming one). Though not a whopping endorsement of their theory, this finding still supports their hypothesis.

*Note:* Campbell and Shiller’s study, tepid support or not, became wildly popular because it supported the view society had long held. Present data violating society’s myths, and those data won’t be met with great popularity. That’s nice because when you discover the truth, the world won’t be trying to adopt it in a hurry, giving it lasting power in markets.

By using the same basic data and traditional notions of P/Es at the start of each year from 1872 to 2024 and actual 10-year subsequent returns, updating this study for this edition, we get an R-squared of 0.11.<sup>7</sup> The P/E only potentially explains 11% of 10-year returns—statistically pretty random. Something else entirely, or some group of other variables, explains the other 89% of price returns. I wouldn’t make a decision on an R-squared of 0.11, and neither should you. Said another way, Campbell and Shiller’s R-squared was 0.40 and ours was 0.11—so a big chunk of their result was based on how they defined P/E differently.

This myth wasn’t hard to debunk. You can arrive at the same general conclusion with Google Finance and an Excel spreadsheet. When it isn’t a myth and it’s real, you will find you need no fancy statistical reengineering and no ultra-complex math in your analysis.

But there’s yet another issue. Even if it were valid, who cares about views of subsequent 10-year returns? Investors mainly want to know how to get positioned for this year and next, the now and the soon, not for 10 years from now. Would you really have cared what the next 10-year return was in 1996, when the next four years rose massively only to be followed by a big bear market? Would you have wanted to miss the big up years in a row, and would you have been content to hold on through the big down years? I doubt it. Actually, I suspect much of this study’s fame is coincidence. Since the celebrated version came out in 1998 and a bubble burst two years later, folks assumed it “worked.” But that was never the point of Shiller and Campbell’s P/E. And when you look at simple P/Es on a shorter-term basis, the high-P/E-is-risky thesis falls apart completely, as we shall see.

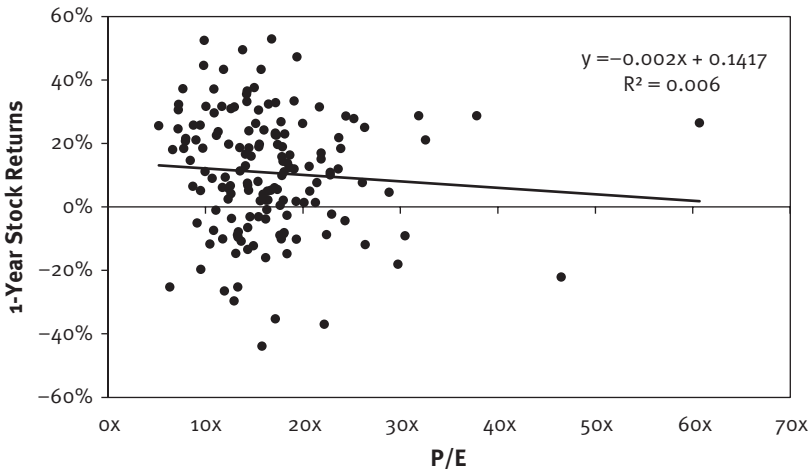
What’s more, forecasting long-term stock returns is a near impossibility because stock prices in the long term are the result primarily of shifts

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in far-distant levels of the supply of equities, which in today's state of knowledge (or ignorance), no one knows how to address. Some of my academic friends get angry when I bring this up. But remember, when anyone gets angry, they are afraid and just can't quite put their finger on their fear. In this case, I think it's because very little real scientific work has been done analyzing shifts in supply and demand for securities. Yet, by definition, shifts in supply and demand are what determine pricing. There are great future advances to be made here, but so far, the progress is minimal despite supply and demand being basic to economics. (We get to supply and demand for securities in Chapter 7.)

For now, let's take a look at our scatter plot again, this time using normal, nonengineered P/Es and subsequent one-year returns from 1872 through 2024 (see Figure 1.2). Note we have a much shallower negative trend line, and the scatter points are even less cooperative. This is our same shotgun blast with a few stray pellets. Does this indicate any sort of correlation at all? With an R-squared of 0.006, the answer is no. If an R-squared of 0.11 is pretty random, an R-squared of 0.006 is randomness itself—pure, perfect randomness.

Finding a correlation where simply none exists is pretty creative; and simply, none exists here. To begin debunking myths on your own, you don't need AI and a quant hedge fund's wunderkind. If it takes ultra-complicated math to support the existence of a market myth, the hypothesis is probably



**Figure 1.2 Relationship Between Annualized (Overlapping) One-Year Returns and P/E Ratios (1872 to 2024).**

*Source: Finaeon, Inc., as of 2/20/2025.*

just wrong. The more jury-rigging and qualification analysis needs, the more likely you're forcing results to support the hypothesis. Forced results are bad science.

### If Not Bad, Can They Be Good?

We have shown there's no correlation between high P/Es and poor stock results (or good ones). Even in light of such damning evidence, some may be reluctant to let go of the "high-P/E-equals-bad-stocks" doctrine. Consider this another way: It may further shock and appall you to learn years with higher P/Es had some excellent returns. Moreover, the one-year returns following the 20 *highest* P/E ratios weren't too shabby—an average of 10.2%.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, 14 of those 20 were up—or 70%.<sup>9</sup> That should give you pause.

Need more evidence? No complicated engineering necessary here, either. Figure 1.3 shows a basic bell curve depicting P/Es and subsequent annual market returns.

Here's how I arrived at the bell curve. We noted the broad market's P/E each January 1 going back to 1872 and ranked each year from low P/E to high. Then we grouped them into intervals creating the familiar bell curve—like shape—with otherwise unrelated years falling into buckets according to their P/Es. The "normal" P/Es fall in the fat part of the bell curve, while the "high" and "low" P/Es fall on the edges.

When you note the P/E ratios for the past 153 years along with the subsequent market return, some empirical truths emerge. Most startling? Most double-digit calendar-year stock market declines—the monster drops everyone fears—occurred when P/Es were below 20, not when they were very high.

In the past 153 years, there were 21 times the US market's total return fell more than 10%. Sixteen times—76% of those most negative years—were on the middle-to-low end of the P/E range (based on the bell curve). Fifteen (71%) happened in the fat part of the curve—on "normal" P/Es. Hardly fodder for a myth. Anyone can get these data off the Internet. Anyone can array them. It doesn't take fancy math. It just takes a little effort. But most people don't ask, so they don't try. And since they don't try, the myth still exists.

So big double-digit drops don't automatically follow high-P/E markets. But since the myth is so widely and rigidly believed, could there be some kernel of truth to it? For example, high-P/E markets must fall more often than those with low P/Es, even if they aren't the monster drops. Right? Well, no! P/Es were below 20.5 in 124 of those years, and the market finished down 32 times (25.8%).



Here's a simple test you can use repeatedly. Someone tells you X causes Y in America's markets—like the P/E example—and even has data to demonstrate it's true. If it's really true in America, then it must also be true in most foreign developed markets. If it isn't similarly true in most other developed Western markets, it isn't really true about capitalism and capital markets and, hence, isn't really true about America—just a chance outcome. I'll not belabor you with the data here—this book already has too many visuals—but if you take the same bell curve approach we used for America's stock market and apply it to foreign markets, the only country where low-P/E markets seemed materially better is Britain—and that is based on a few, relatively big years. Elsewhere, it is the same randomness as in America.<sup>10</sup> Whenever anyone tells you something works a certain way in America, a good cross-check is to see if it also works outside America. Because if it doesn't, it doesn't really work robustly in America either!

Some will say, "You must see the high-P/E problem in the right way." (*Warning:* a precursor to a reengineering attempt to support a myth, and it likely won't hold.) For example, they may agree it isn't just that a high P/E is worse than a low P/E, but when you get over a certain P/E level, the risk sky-rockets, and when you get under a certain P/E, it plummets.

For example, they may assert market P/Es over 25 are bad and P/Es under 15 good and everything in between is what confuses everyone—throwing the averages off, leading you to not see things the way they would have you see them. Fair enough! That's easy to test. You take all the times when the market had a P/E over 25 and envision we sold and then bought back at some level—you pick it, I don't care what it is as long as you apply it consistently. It turns out, historically, regardless of the level picked, none really beats a long-term buy-and-hold in America.

The same is true overseas (except, again, in Britain, where you can make a weak case a low P/E has had a variety of approaches seeming to work—but only in Britain, which is probably just coincidence. And if you throw out a very few, very big years in Britain from a very long time ago, it falls apart there, too).

Suppose you sell when the market's P/E hits 22 and buy when it falls to 15. That approach lags a simple buy and hold. Suppose you change the 22 to 23. Still lags! How about dropping the 15 to 13 or raising it to 17? Still lags. What's more, there isn't a buy-and-sell approach that works overseas.

You may disbelieve all this. Great. Prove I'm wrong. To prove it, you must find a buy-and-sell rule based on simple P/Es that beats the market with one-, two- and three-year returns. It must work basically the same way in a handful of foreign developed markets and if you start or end your test on different dates. Try to find it. Maybe you're better than I am, but I looked and looked and can't find it in any way anyone would believe ... if they hadn't been indoctrinated with the myth already.

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Every time a high-P/E market leads to very bad returns, like in 2000, 2001, and 2002, you will find a comparable number of examples where it doesn't, like in 1997, 1998, 1999, 2003, and 2009. Or the majority of history's longest bull market, from 2009 to 2020. And don't even look at recent years, like 2021, 2023 or 2024—you'll get dizzy from heights. There is simply no basis for this myth.

### Always Look at It Differently

Investors fall prey to myth because they're used to seeing investing truisms in accepted and normal ways—as they were taught. Think even a bit differently—not in a complicated way, just differently, like graphing a bell curve or looking for the same phenomenon overseas—and myths tend to fall apart. Whenever you're confirming an investing belief, try it from a fresh angle. Go crazy. Be creative. Flip things on their heads, backward and inside out. Hack them up and go over their guts. Instead of trying to be intuitive, think counterintuitively—which may turn out to be much more intuitive.

For fun, let's look at why, intuitively, high P/Es don't spell disaster for stocks. Most investors look at stocks with high P/Es and assume their prices are too high relative to the companies' earnings. If a price is proportionately much greater than earnings (so goes the thinking), the stock must be overpriced; what goes up must come down. What investors forget is the P isn't the only moving variable in the P/E.

In years following high-P/E markets, earnings often rose faster than share prices. And often after low-P/E years, we ran into unexpected rough economies where earnings vanished. In 1929, the most famous market peak of all time, P/Es were *low*, not *high*, because the soon-to-disappear earnings were too high in 1929, making the P/E low. And early in 2009, around the post-financial crisis market trough—arguably among the greatest buying opportunities in recent history—P/Es had soared. The recession demolished earnings harder than stock prices.

When we buy stocks, we're buying future earnings. At some times we're willing to pay more than at others. In high-P/E markets, earnings often exceed expectations (as in 2003 and 2009), and the market prices in higher earnings before we can see them coming. Just by considering what is happening with the denominator side of the P/E—looking at it differently—you can reason for yourself why the myth is wrong.

The myth that high-P/E markets are dangerous and low-P/E markets are safe persists. But anyone with an Internet connection and a pencil can see high-P/E years are, in themselves, not any worse than lower-P/E periods.

Why does this myth persist? Because fundamentally, TGH is perverse and counterintuitive. It can be painful to accept whatever is fueling your water-cooler debates is wrong or already priced into markets. It's humbling but true.

### How Would Your Grandparents Think About It?

Now I'll steal a page from Chapter 3 and focus on how our brains blindside us on the P/E issue. There's a genetic reason people fear high P/E markets. I can't prove this, but I believe it's true. And you can't disprove it. It's a pretty different way to see this dilemma. You inherited genes and the information processor that is your brain from your parents, as did they from theirs. Far-distant ancestors had brains adept at processing certain types of information—that which related to problems they encountered. They passed on their genes successfully. Were that not true, you and I wouldn't be here. The folks back then who didn't process information well relative to those problems don't have descendants walking the earth now.

The human brain wasn't really set up to deal with the stock market. It was set up to deal with problems of basic human survival. One problem early humanity learned to process was heights. If they fell from greater heights, the risk of death or crippling (pretty much the same thing back then) was exponential. Higher heights increased risk. Falling from two feet is just a stumble. Falling from 10 feet isn't all that tough for a 10-year-old jumping off a roof but bone breaking for older people. Falling from 40 feet usually kills and from 400 feet always does.

Folks learned well when confronted with problems appearing in a framework of heights—more height meant more risk. Greater heights meant you could fall farther—exactly how people think of P/Es. They envision higher P/Es as farther potential falls and lower P/Es as less distance to smack into the floor, so there is less smacking risk. Any time I present information to you in a form appearing as a heights framework, more height scares you and less height seems safer. If I can present the same information in a way not involving heights, your fear fades instantly. (We do that in a few moments.)

### A Quick Preview of Question Three

When the market's P/E is higher than normal, most investors know it. Even those who don't know what P/E stands for argue “these days” the market is frighteningly overvalued. Their resulting fear of heights and concern over possibly sustaining a loss can be explained by a behavioral finance truism: People hate losses much more than they like gains.<sup>11</sup>

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People talk about investors being risk averse, but that isn't quite right. Investors are provably loss-averse. Two pioneers in the field of behavioral finance, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, demonstrated and proved normal Americans (yes, you're probably pretty normal) hate losses about two and a half times as much as they like gains.<sup>12</sup> Investors feel the sting of a monetary loss much more intensely than they enjoy the pleasure of a gain. Deep down, you probably already knew that was true of you. And because loss is more agonizingly painful than gain is pleasant, investors will do more to avoid losses than to achieve gains.

Investors will actually adopt *additional risk* if they believe it can help them avoid a loss they would otherwise incur. Kahneman and Tversky described this phenomenon in what they called "prospect theory." They discovered normal investors (again, you) confuse actual risk with the *perception* of risk, all in the effort to avoid the possibility of a loss.<sup>13</sup> The perception (or, one could say, misconception) of possible losses long mistakenly associated with high-P/E markets is what keeps investors fearful in what could otherwise be a relatively low-risk market environment. The same powers are at work at the bottom of a bear market. Investors are typically most fearful at the end of bear markets, when risk is diminished and upside potential considerable. Investors' perceptions are just off.

Many, particularly those who consider themselves "value investors," have had violent and near-religious reactions to this notion. Instead of practicing introspection and asking themselves Question One—what do I believe that is wrong?—they grab at any straw to disavow they're influenced by a very natural bias. In rebuttal, they claim the phenomenon occurs because ultra-high P/Es come from suppressed earnings posted at the end of a recession. Not quite. This sometimes happens, but it's far from universal. It certainly wasn't true in 1996, 1997, 1998, and 1999. To excuse that, investors say the markets are just irrational. Investors' vehemence that ultra-high P/Es must have a high risk is another aspect of the perverseness of TGH.

### Upside Down and Backward If You Can

We've demonstrated how to use Question One with a well-entrenched misconception. As you strike out on your own, testing your own mythology, be thorough. Good scientists don't stop once they get the answer to a question; they look at it repeatedly from different angles.

First, be realistic about your findings. Don't jump to conclusions. One might consider the previous data and create a new myth—high P/Es predict above-average returns. Don't fall for that trick. The evidence here is enough to utterly decimate any wrongheaded belief about high P/Es being bad for

stocks. Anything more is inconclusive. It isn't enough. It isn't overwhelming. It won't let you win much more often than you lose. Ultimately, P/Es aren't, by themselves, a predictor of future results. Any future results.

Furthermore, if you get just one result supporting your hypothesis, no matter how remarkable, it's happenstance, not a pattern. This is true for anything you encounter. Don't invest based on happenstance. For example, you might be tempted to conclude ultra-high P/E markets tend to be low risk and high reward. Yes, it is true ultra-high P/Es have led to some great stock returns. But there haven't been enough occurrences to make this anything more than an interesting observation and probably coincidence. As you create and test, you must test as many occurrences as you find.

We now know P/Es have no predictive power, so is the P/E good for anything? To find out, we need to steal a page again from Chapter 2 and Question Two. What can we fathom about P/Es that is hard for others to fathom? A standard trick to help you see better and see things others don't is to look at it from a different perspective. One powerful way to test your belief and results is to flip your myth on its head and see what you see then.

In the first two editions of this book, I suggested flipping the P/E on its head. By putting the *earnings* over the *price* in this equation, you have the exact same information in a different framework—the earnings-to-price ratio, better called the *earnings yield*. This is simply the inverse of the P/E—the E/P. Note: It still isn't a forecasting tool, but it can help eliminate the fear of heights embedded in P/Es. Essentially, it is the return you would get forever, not including dividends, if earnings never budged.

Investors are used to seeing expected returns of bonds and cash quoted in yields but valuing stocks by their P/Es. By inverting the P/E and looking at the earnings yield, you can compare apples to apples. Table 1.1 shows how to take a P/E and arrive at an earnings yield—a P/E of 20 is really a price of \$20 divided by \$1 of earnings. So the E/P for this is 1 divided by 20, or 5%. When you think of the relationship as an earnings yield, it compares better to interest rates (as we see later, it should), and the heights framework scaring us about P/E disappears instantly. The P/E of 20 scares you, but the earnings yield of 5% doesn't. It's pretty easy math—again, no advanced degree necessary.

This comparison is more rational and straightforward than determining if a stock is cheap or expensive based on P/E alone. Since stocks and bonds compete for investor dollars, the comparison of bond yields and stock earnings yields gives you something concrete for comparison. For example, if you have a market with a P/E of 20, most folks would say that seems “high.” How do you think about a 5% earnings yield? If bond interest rates are 8%, the 5% earnings yield might not be attractive, but if bonds are 3%, it could be.

**Table 1.1 What Is an Earnings Yield?**

P/E	→	E/P	=	EY%
33		1/33		3%
25		1/25		4%
20		1/20		5%
15		1/15		6%
10		1/10		10%
7		1/7		14%
5		1/5		20%

Before you think a stock market (or single stock) with a 5% earnings yield is inferior to, say, a 6% US Treasury bond, remember the tax treatment. The earnings yield is effectively a company's after-tax annualized cost of raising expansion capital by selling stock. What does that mean?

Since the P/E is an after-tax number, you know the E/P is an after-tax number, too. A company can get expansion capital by selling stock or issuing a corporate bond. But if it issues a corporate bond, the interest paid on that bond is deductible for tax purposes against revenue. The corporate bond rate is a pretax number. The E/P is an after-tax number.

Suppose the stock has a P/E of 20 and it's an average-grade corporation, meaning a BBB corporate bond rating. As 2024 ended, it could borrow 10-year money through a bond at about 5.7%.<sup>14</sup> Assuming a 21% corporate tax rate, the 5.7% cost is really 4.5% after tax. (To get the tax-adjusted equivalent, multiply the 5.7% rate by 1 minus the 21% tax rate—or 0.79.) The stock's E/P is 5%, already after tax. So it's cheaper to raise expansion capital by issuing a bond at 4.5% than selling stock at 5%. That gap isn't very wide. But if you expect profit growth or, maybe have a slightly higher earnings yield, the margin improves. A CFO may use this to justify buying a competitor or floating bonds to buy shares back. That is the firm's viewpoint.

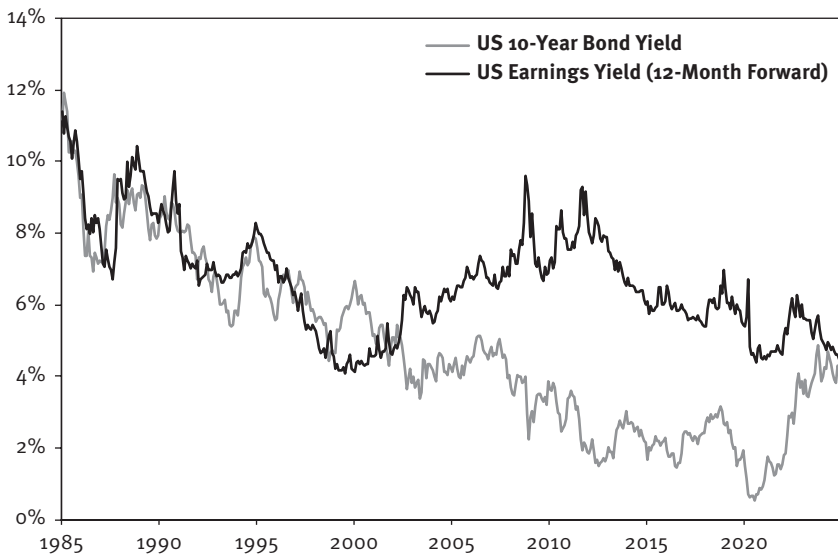
From your viewpoint, it's somewhat different. The earnings yield needn't be above the tax-adjusted bond yield to make stocks more attractive than bonds. When you buy stocks, you do so assuming future earnings will be somewhat higher due to subsequent future growth. Stocks as a group tend to generate earnings growth over time, sometimes more, other times less. But a bond coupon is fixed. You know it won't rise. If you hold it to maturity, you will get that interest rate (as long as the firm remains solvent). When you buy

stocks, you're actually buying the future average earnings yield, which is likely somewhat higher than the current earnings yield. When you buy bonds, the future average bond yield is the current yield. For this reason, the current earnings yield needn't be higher than the bond yield to make stocks attractive relatively.

Interestingly, the earnings yield for the US stock market and the bond yield have historically tracked pretty close to each other—at least since 1985 (see Figure 1.4). When the earnings yield has been above the bond yield, it wasn't by much, but these usually marked good times to own stocks. Why? When the earnings yield is above the bond yield, stocks are typically undervalued relative to bonds. *Translation:* Stocks are relatively cheap.

Here again, I will remind you this is by no means a forecasting tool. For most of the period 2002 through 2024, earnings yields topped 10-year Treasury yields.<sup>15</sup> Yet we cycled from bull market to 2008's bear market. Then to history's longest bull market, which ended in history's shortest bear market, 2020's COVID lockdown-driven swoon.

And a further problem emerges now: Many pundits now cite it, wrongly, as a forecasting tool. They've even dubbed it the "Fed Model," suggesting the wizards who craft monetary policy for the US divine equity markets' future from it. (If you detect sarcasm here, you're reading this right.) In our



**Figure 1.4 US 10-Year Bond Yield Versus Earnings Yield.**

**Source:** Finaeon, Inc., as of 2/28/2025.

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day and age, many deify central bankers. This only means the gauge is too widely watched to work at all. It has reached myth status. Don't believe forecasts based on this alone.

### When You Are Really, Really Wrong

We've talked about those myths perpetuated by investors inventing or imagining causal correlations where none exist. What about those myths so wrong the inverse is actually true? Sometimes, Question One will reveal you have been not only wrong but really, really wrong. Don't fret. Discovering you have been wrong and uncovering a reverse truth yields another basis for a market move. A powerful one because you know nearly everyone is positioning for the exact opposite of what is likely to happen.

It may be hard for you to imagine something you and your fellow investors can get so completely wrong. But there are some myths in the misguided investor doctrine held so dearly, questioning them is almost sacrilegious. Suggesting such a belief be scrutinized, if only to confirm its veracity, would bring outrage, scandal and possible excommunication. These myths, the most sacrosanct beliefs in the investor and social catechism, those no one dares question, are sometimes ones we find to be so wrong the exact opposite holds true.

### The Holiest of Holies: The Federal Budget Deficit Myth

You probably believe a high federal budget deficit is bad. *Everybody* knows budget deficits are bad. How do we know? We know because everyone knows. Duh! Pundits, politicians, patriots, poker partners, your parents, your pet parakeet and worst of all, Katy Perry, Brad Pitt, and Dolly Parton. Everyone! More important, everyone *believes* it. There is absolutely no reason to question this belief. I mean, how do you question Dolly Parton? Which makes this sacredly held myth a great candidate for Question One. What do you believe that is wrong? Better yet, reframe and flip it on its head and ask yourself the reverse.

Is a high federal budget deficit good—and good for stocks?

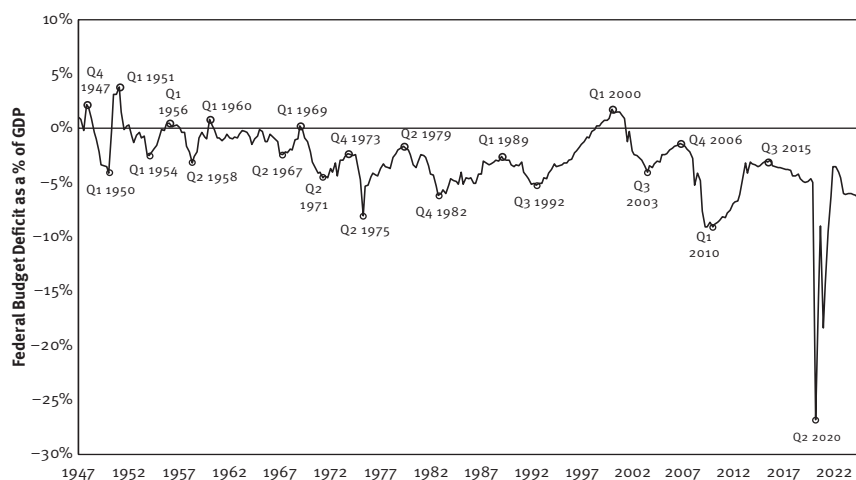
Ask that question too loudly and someone may come after you with a butterfly net and commit you to a nice, safe, padded cell. Believing a budget deficit is bad is part of our collective Western-world wisdom and culture—nay, our civic duty. As stated earlier, *deficit* has the same Latin root as *deficient*. Why question something believed for thousands of years? Because it's wrong!

We are taught as children to regard debt as bad, more debt as worse, and a lot of debt as downright immoral. Right after we finished making paper turkeys for Thanksgiving, we got a cookie, some apple juice, a lecture on the immorality of debt—and then naptime.

As a society, we're morally opposed to debt. We haven't evolved too far from our Puritan forefathers in this regard. And deficits make more debt. Abhorring a budget deficit isn't just an American sentiment. Other inhabitants of Western developed nations fret as we do over deficits. In many places, more so! Come to think of it, they fret over ours, too—more than theirs.

Is any of this anxiety deserved? Since 1974, America has run a federal budget surplus in just four years (1998, 1999, 2000, and 2001). That's it! During the budget surplus of the late 1990s, the stock market peaked, leading to a bear market and the start of a recession. That recession was fairly short and shallow, but the bear market persisted three years and was huge. Clearly, the budget surplus didn't lead to outstanding stock returns. If there is no empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis (yes, Virginia, it's just a hypothesis) that budget deficits are bad for stocks, could the opposite be true?

It appears so. Figure 1.5 shows the federal budget balance going back to 1947 as a percent of annual gross domestic product (GDP). Anything above the horizontal line is a budget surplus; anything below is a deficit. We've noted relative peaks and troughs. The counterintuitive truth is stock market returns following periodic deficit extremes have been much higher on average than surplus peaks or even decreasing deficits.



**Figure 1.5 Budget Deficits Are Good for Stocks.**

**Source:** White House, Bureau of Economic Analysis, and FactSet, as of 2/20/2025.

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Table 1.2 shows subsequent price returns after each cycle's peak surplus or smallest deficit—when Uncle Sam was fiscally strongest. Look at the 12-month subsequent returns after budget surpluses (or the cycle's smallest deficit) and compare with the returns after the largest deficits.

**Table 1.2 Stock Returns Following Budget Balance Extremes**

Surplus Peaks/Smallest Deficit		Subsequent S&P 500 Price Return		
Date		12 Month	24 Month	36 Month
Q4 1947	Annualized	-0.7%	4.7%	10.1%
	Cumulative	-0.7%	9.5%	33.4%
Q1 1951	Annualized	13.9%	8.7%	8.0%
	Cumulative	13.9%	18.2%	25.9%
Q1 1956	Annualized	-9.0%	-6.8%	4.6%
	Cumulative	-9.0%	-13.2%	14.4%
Q1 1960	Annualized	17.6%	12.1%	6.4%
	Cumulative	17.6%	25.7%	20.3%
Q1 1969	Annualized	-11.7%	-0.6%	1.8%
	Cumulative	-11.7%	-1.2%	5.6%
Q4 1973	Annualized	-29.7%	-3.8%	3.3%
	Cumulative	-29.7%	-7.5%	10.2%
Q2 1979	Annualized	11.0%	12.9%	2.1%
	Cumulative	11.0%	27.5%	6.5%
Q1 1989	Annualized	15.3%	12.8%	11.0%
	Cumulative	15.3%	27.2%	36.9%
Q1 2000	Annualized	-22.6%	-12.5%	-17.3%
	Cumulative	-22.6%	-23.4%	-43.4%
Q4 2006	Annualized	3.5%	-20.2%	-7.7%
	Cumulative	3.5%	-36.3%	-21.4%
Q3 2015	Annualized	12.9%	14.5%	14.9%
	Cumulative	12.9%	31.2%	51.8%
<b>Average</b>	<b>Annualized</b>	<b>0.0%</b>	<b>2.0%</b>	<b>3.4%</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>Cumulative</b>	<b>0.0%</b>	<b>5.2%</b>	<b>12.7%</b>

Source: FactSet and Finaeon, Inc., as of 2/20/2025. S&P 500 price index.

Which world do you want to be living in? The one with the average return of 0.0% or the one with the average return of 18.8%? Now look out over 36-month returns. Those appalling deficits get you an average cumulative return of 29.2% compared with 12.7% from the surpluses.

Deficit Peaks		Subsequent S&P 500 Price Return		
Date		12 Month	24 Month	36 Month
Q1 1950	Annualized	23.8%	18.7%	13.5%
	Cumulative	23.8%	40.9%	46.3%
Q1 1954	Annualized	35.8%	34.1%	17.9%
	Cumulative	35.8%	80.0%	63.7%
Q2 1958	Annualized	29.2%	12.2%	12.6%
	Cumulative	29.2%	25.8%	42.9%
Q2 1967	Annualized	9.9%	3.8%	-7.1%
	Cumulative	9.9%	7.8%	-19.8%
Q2 1971	Annualized	7.5%	2.3%	-4.8%
	Cumulative	7.5%	4.6%	-13.7%
Q2 1975	Annualized	9.5%	2.7%	0.1%
	Cumulative	9.5%	5.6%	0.4%
Q4 1982	Annualized	17.3%	9.0%	14.5%
	Cumulative	17.3%	18.9%	50.2%
Q3 1992	Annualized	9.8%	5.2%	11.8%
	Cumulative	9.8%	10.7%	39.9%
Q3 2003	Annualized	11.9%	11.1%	10.3%
	Cumulative	11.9%	23.4%	34.1%
Q1 2010	Annualized	13.4%	9.7%	10.3%
	Cumulative	13.4%	20.4%	34.2%
Q2 2020	Annualized	38.6%	10.5%	12.8%
	Cumulative	38.6%	22.1%	43.5%
<b>Average</b>	<b>Annualized</b>	<b>18.8%</b>	<b>10.9%</b>	<b>8.4%</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>Cumulative</b>	<b>18.8%</b>	<b>23.7%</b>	<b>29.2%</b>

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The plain truth is, since 1947, if an investor had purchased stocks when the budget deficit was its largest, they would have seen one-, two-, and three-year returns much higher on average than if purchased at budget surplus periods or times the deficit was smallest. Buying in the aftermath of budget surpluses would have rendered materially below-average returns.

If you're beginning to think perhaps budget surpluses aren't the best thing to happen to stocks, you're getting it. If you suspect the wry hand of TGH, you're also getting it. Budget surpluses aren't a panacea. They historically lead to bad markets. Don't wish for them.

This may not make sense at first blush. Conventional wisdom depicts a deficit as some sort of gigantic anchor, holding down the economy and ramming debt down its over-indebted throat. As consumers, we're careful to not overdraw our checking accounts and believe the government should do the same. Many politicians will have you believe deficits must be reduced, and now. There are no politicians saying more debt is good (although many times their policies inexorably lead us there).

### The True Meaning of Politics

If you don't know the origin of the word *politics*, let me enlighten you. The word *politics* comes from the Greek *poli*, meaning "many," and *tics*, meaning "small bloodsucking creatures." Unless a poli-tic stands up and announces, "I routinely lie, cheat, and steal to help my career and care nothing about you, whoever you are," you should take anything he or she says with a grain of salt.

People have some difficulty with this. You dislike any poli-tic saying things you ideologically oppose. And you know they are dishonest and a slimeball—if your child planned to marry them, you would instead seek a cult deprogrammer to protect them. Harder to accept? When another poli-tic says things you like and believe in, he or she is simply lying. Of course, that's just my view. Suppose I'm wrong.

Poli-tics, overwhelmingly, aren't students of capital markets. Many of them were lawyers. Many were simply career politicians. Yes, we have Trump today who ran a business. But running a business isn't the same as studying capital markets. At any rate, a good general rule: Don't look to politicians for expertise in finance or economics. They may be honest enough until they become Beltway blowhards, but they still aren't experts on markets and economics and will never use the Three Questions. Poli-tics never think about when they're wrong, how to fathom what others can't fathom and how to see when their brains are misguiding them. Poli-tics couldn't use the Three

Questions if they had to. Consider: Uncovering a fact no one else sees has no value to a poli-tic. They want to say popular things, and popular things are things most people believe. Promoting mythology is good politics! (Perhaps I've been bombastic for comedy's sake in the past few paragraphs, but you'll be a better investor and sleep better at night if you tune out approximately 97% of what poli-tics say.)

That budget deficits are good for stocks isn't a lucky fluke. Economically, it makes sense if you can get yourself to think about debt and deficits correctly. (We cover that in Chapter 6.) For now, suppose budget deficits really are good for stocks in America and surpluses really are bad. If that is true, we ought to be able to see it happening close to the same way in other developed Western nations. That trick is a really nifty one most folks never use. And we do see it overseas.

In other developed nations (as I demonstrate for you in Chapter 6), budget deficits have preceded good stock market returns and surpluses have preceded gloomier times. This isn't a socioeconomic-political statement. All we are doing is looking at cold hard facts and encouraging you to do the same. Folks who are hamstrung by bias are plagued with misconception and can't see the truth even when it's right there in front of them. Instead, always ask if what you believe is actually false.

### What About Those Other Deficits?

The federal budget deficit isn't the only deficit bogeyman getting investors' knickers knotted. As soon as I tell you the budget deficit isn't bad for stocks, your reaction may be dismissal, anger, and then a framework shift—that other deficits, like the trade deficit, must be bad. You've heard it so often. You've also heard it's bad for the dollar.

We look at such assertions in Chapters 6 and 7, where I show these two forms of deficits aren't bad for stocks or the dollar. (I would add that the trade deficit is not a deficit in any true economic sense of the term.) I mention this here as another version of something everyone believes that is false. You hear it, accept it, believe it is true, wince every time a new record trade deficit number is announced but never stop to ask, "I *think* it's bad; but is it really, and how would I check?" Because you know in your heart, if everyone is wrong, and trade deficits aren't bad for the stock market and the dollar, it would be tremendously bullish because that would be one less thing to fret that to most folks is a huge burden. And that is something you can know others don't.

### It's All Relatively Relative

Part of the reason investors freak out about deficits—budget, trade, and otherwise—is they forget to think relatively (a cognitive error). They hear we have an estimated \$918 billion trade deficit (as of the end of 2024).<sup>16</sup> “Holy cow! That’s a lot of moo-laa!” they think. “Nine hundred billion?? I don’t have nine hundred billion. Not even Elon Musk has that much.” News editors and talking heads lambaste whomever they think is responsible, using words like “record breaking,” “staggering” and “irresponsible” to describe the deficit’s size. Well, of course it sounds high. But is it? Are our perceptions right?

To see this correctly, we must scale. We must look at our trade deficit as a percentage of our overall economy. If you think \$900 billion is a lot, what do you think about \$29.2 trillion?<sup>17</sup> That’s the comparable size of America’s GDP (also at yearend 2024).<sup>18</sup> As a percentage of our national output, the trade deficit is a mere 3.1%. The historical average further shows it’s nothing to sweat about. The current \$918 billion trade “deficit” is smaller as a percentage of GDP than the 3.25% noted in the first edition of this book—and the 3.4% in the second!

Pundits won’t mention the trade deficit as a percentage of GDP, however, because they assume you’re rational and won’t get exercised over a trade deficit that is 3.1% of our overall income, below levels from yearend 2010 and July 2006.

This doesn’t work just with deficits. Anytime someone tries to scare you with huge numbers, think about it relatively—think *scale*.

### Question Everything You Know

Success in investing requires you to question everything you think you know—particularly those things you think you really, really know. Using Question One properly gives you discipline to start preventing some basic errors. The ability to just avoid mistakes is key to successful investing. As you examine mythology and begin discovering faulty logic, don’t simply correct it once and forget about it. Investing is an applied science, not a craft. If you get a validated answer to a hypothesis, don’t assume you can apply the results always and everywhere and get the same outcome. TGH is an ever-changing opponent requiring constant retesting of hypotheses.

Knowing big federal budget deficits don’t necessarily signal bad times ahead and may indeed signal the reverse is fairly shocking, though undeniably true. Someday, in some future universe, the investing public may relinquish

this myth and realize the whole world has been wrong on this point. That certainly hasn't happened yet, given fear in America, Europe, and even small debt-and-deficit Australia and Canada. Should that occur, though, your edge will be gone. You will no longer know something others don't. When everyone knows federal budget deficits are to be cheered not jeered, the market will efficiently price it in. By using Question One and constantly retesting your investing doctrine, you won't fall prey to such an event, implausible though it is.

You may say (and it's a great thing to say), "But if you tell me in this book the market's P/E has nothing to do with future returns and big budget deficits are bullish not bearish, won't the whole world know? And then won't it stop working?" If the world embraces these truths, then because the market is a discounter of all widely known information, these truths would become priced into markets and knowing them wouldn't give you an edge. They wouldn't work because they would be widely known.

But that didn't happen after I first published this book in 2007. Didn't happen after 2012, either. I doubt it will this time. Most folks who read Chapter 1 will think the notions expressed about P/Es and deficits are so screwy, they ignore them completely and fall back on the mythologies. That would be comfortable and easy. Most investors will never see this book, and of those buying it, half won't read it. Of those who do, many won't get past this chapter in disgust. They will reject the truth, prefer mythology and see me as silly. I hope they do because when I see them see me as silly and wrong, I know I will be able to use these truisms for a long time. If they adopt most of these truisms, I'll need to come up with new ones to know something others don't.

Whereas the Campbell-Shiller paper was rapidly embraced and quickly became globally famous and popular because it supported the standard mythology, evidence contradicting market mythologies fortunately tends to be about as noticed as a rock thrown into a lake—a minor ripple followed by near-instant absence from societal memory. This isn't the first time I've written about the high P/E myth. I started over 25 years ago. I'll bet it is as prevalent 5 and 10 years from now as it is today, and you can still invest on it. But of course, I could be wrong and then you move onto the next myth. That's life.

The real benefit of Question One is it allows you to know something others don't know by knowing where you otherwise would have been wrong but thought you were right. Master this skill, and you can improve forever with it. You can keep learning things others don't know while reducing your own propensity to make mistakes.

### **30 The Only Three Questions That Still Count**

Discovering new investing truths is a coincidental result of asking Question One—a lucky accident. If you're purposefully seeking what no one else knows, you must also learn to use and apply Question Two: What can you fathom that others find unfathomable? Even contemplating such a thing seems pretty unfathomable to most people, but that is exactly what we start doing if you simply turn the page and continue to Chapter 2.