

# VICTORY RS LARGE CAP ALPHA FUND QUARTERLY COMMENTARY

As of March 31, 2024

## Market Commentary

Sometimes more of the same is a good thing for investors, and on the whole, that's what the domestic broad market delivered during the first quarter of 2024. The S&P 500® Index,<sup>1</sup> the most popular proxy for the U.S. stock market, continued its upward momentum and logged multiple new all-time highs during the quarter.

No doubt about it, the U.S. economy has been stronger than expected, replete with surprising job growth, strong labor participation, and a consumer that continues to spend, albeit at slightly more modest levels than last year. All this has helped fuel corporate earnings and, ultimately, drive many stocks higher. It's also noteworthy that the domestic stock market continued to defy—or ignore for the time being—a few potent headwinds. For starters, the benchmark 10-year Treasury climbed to 4.2% at the end of the first quarter. More than anything, this reflects slightly shifting expectations in monetary policy. At the start of the year, market pundits (as well as the fed funds futures) were pricing in significant and imminent rate cuts beginning as early as March. But “sticky” inflation readings throughout the first quarter have pushed back expectations to later in the year. Nevertheless, equities seemed unfazed.

Continuing geopolitical turmoil, as well as oil prices that seemed headed for \$90 per barrel as the quarter ended, must also be viewed as potential threats to the economy and the stock market's strong momentum. Prolonged higher energy costs have the ability to reignite inflation, which could hamstring the Federal Reserve and keep interest rates higher for longer.

In terms of domestic value-oriented strategies—our area of focus—the Russell 3000® Value Index<sup>2</sup> returned 8.6% during the first quarter of 2024. In terms of market capitalizations, small-cap value stocks, as represented by the Russell 2000® Value Index,<sup>3</sup> returned 2.9% for the quarter. The Russell Midcap® Value Index<sup>4</sup> returned 8.2%, while large-cap stocks, as represented by the Russell 1000® Value Index,<sup>5</sup> returned 9.0% during the same period.

Driven largely by the Financials and Energy sectors, it was interesting to note that the Russell 3000® Value Index also delivered robust returns only modestly below those of growth stocks, as measured by the Russell 3000® Growth Index.<sup>6</sup> This is interesting given the vast underperformance of Value versus Growth strategies in 2023. Perhaps this indicates the beginnings of a trend change, one that we've been anticipating, in which companies generating cash flow and earnings will once again be rewarded more than those with growth potential but no earnings.

After an extended period of exceedingly low interest rates, fiscal tailwinds, and easy access to cheap capital, we continue to believe that we are in a new regime. Even if the Federal Reserve becomes more accommodative later this year, we do not believe we are headed back to an era of near-zero interest rates. This reality has been difficult for the market to digest, and we've seen that manifest in periods of volatility and uncertainty. Naturally, this often causes prices to dislocate from fundamentals, thus creating an environment that should benefit astute active managers.

As a result, we believe actively managed, value-oriented approaches should be well positioned going forward. Companies with sound balance sheets and solid fundamentals should once again be viewed favorably in this environment. Our team will continue to search for companies with a combination of improving ROIC (return on invested capital) and stock prices trading at what we perceive as a deep discount to intrinsic value. We believe that allocating to these types of businesses is a means to generate attractive risk-adjusted returns over longer time periods, and this continues to be a primary focus for us as we look toward the remainder of 2024 and beyond.

## Performance Review

For the three months ended March 31, 2024, the Victory RS Large Cap Alpha Fund (A shares without sales charge) outperformed its benchmark Russell 1000® Value Index (the “Index”) and returned 12.73% versus a return of 8.99% for the Index.

In the first quarter, strong performance from stock selection in Utilities and Financials aided relative performance, while stock selection in Consumer Staples and Materials detracted.

## Investment Strategy

The RS Value Team seeks to invest in good companies, led by strong management teams, that are attractively valued. Our decision to invest in any company starts with business analysis and an understanding of the company's unit-level economics. Our work on unit-level economics helps us determine the quality and key drivers of the business. We are ROIC-focused investors and seek to invest in companies that we believe have the potential to create shareholder value due to an improvement in the returns of the existing assets or through attractive reinvestment opportunities. We are long-term investors who use our investment time horizon as a competitive advantage and are attracted to out-of-favor and/or misunderstood companies in the market.

The next step in our process is to assess the management team. Our evaluation of a company's management team is critical to our investment decision. We regularly meet with management to gauge how they think about their business: Are they focused on (and compensated for) growing earnings at any cost, or do they understand ROIC and how value is created? Additionally, we perform detailed historical analyses of management's capital decisions—looking at acquisitions, asset sales, and measures of capital stewardship. This analysis provides us with the conviction to invest with strong management teams that we expect will be able to navigate through short-term market volatility and appear to be poised to deliver long-term shareholder value.

The final step in our analysis is valuation. To the RS Value Team, value investing is buying a business at a discount to what we believe it is actually worth. We determine what a company is worth by assessing a company's current share price versus its expected cash flow streams or long-term net asset value based upon the management team's plan for value creation. ROIC is the lens through which we analyze that value creation. Our research has shown that, over time, stock price performance has a strong correlation to improving ROIC as opposed to traditional valuation

measurements like price to earnings (P/E). We seek to invest in companies that we believe can create shareholder value due to an improvement in the returns of the existing assets or through attractive reinvestment opportunities. We pay close attention to a company's financial strength, scrutinizing financial statements, and we run various financial models to understand our downside. This quantitative analysis gives us confidence in our investment thesis and helps us determine at what stock price we are comfortable investing.

### Select Position Review

Below, we review two businesses in an effort to use tangible examples to highlight our investment process.

**RTX Corporation (RTX)** is an aerospace & defense company that provides systems and services to commercial, military, and government customers. The company has three main segments: Collins Aerospace, Pratt & Whitney, and Raytheon. Collins provides OEM and aftermarket products—predominantly landing, flight control, and electric control systems—to commercial and military aerospace customers. Pratt & Whitney manufactures aircraft engines for business jet, commercial, military, and general aviation customers. Raytheon focuses on the defense market, with a focus on missile systems, missile defense, and advanced sensors and radars.

RTX was an outperformer in the first quarter as the company made progress on repairs to its Geared Turbofan (GTF) product for commercial customers while also benefiting from a strong defense market. Last year, the company disclosed that powdered metal used to manufacture some parts of the GTF had a condition which required accelerated inspections. In the first quarter, the company has executed its inspections and upgrading of parts according to its plan, which has helped retire risk associated with this issue, and the market became more comfortable with the timeline for the ultimate solution of this problem. RTX also continued to benefit from steady demand for its defense products given conflicts in Europe and the Middle East along with generally higher geopolitical tensions globally. We continue to believe RTX will provide solid free cash flow growth over the next few years and contribute to performance for our shareholders.

During the quarter we initiated a position in **SS&C Technologies (SSNC)**, the largest fund administrator, which provides trade reconciliation, financial statement preparation, and recordkeeping. The company serves 9 of the top 10 prime brokers, 75 of the top 100 hedge funds, and all of the top 20 asset managers. SSNC's product suite has a strong moat because it is integrated into its customers' operations and embedded in daily work processes. Switching between fund administrators is such a painful technological, operational, and integration challenge that SSNC has 97% revenue retention. The company has consistently gained share through reinvesting in its technology (\$2B of R&D over the last 5 years) as well as acquisitions that have expanded its product suite to meet its customers' full needs.

We believe SSNC is poised to improve its ROIC because the company changed its executive incentive compensation to focus on organic growth and operating cash flow. We have already begun to see signs of organic growth improving from 2% to 3% over the last two years to 4.5% last quarter. In 2022, SSNC paid \$1.7B to acquire the Blue Prism Group, a leading robotics processing automation company. Of SSNC's 27,000 employees, we believe half are focused on routine repetitive processes that can be automated by Blue Prism's software, which will cut costs and improve margins. Critically, the founder and CEO is the company's largest shareholder (13% or \$2B of stock), which gives us confidence that he is laser-focused on these efforts.

### Outlook

The rate of inflation has subsided, and the consensus appears to be that we have reached the end of the rate hiking cycle. Debate is now focused around when the Fed may start easing. However, declaring a victory over inflation too soon is not without risks. The U.S. and the rest of the world continue to manage the impacts of excessively elevated prices and higher interest rates while contending with geopolitical upheaval. The potential for a policy error remains high, particularly as we transition from a pandemic to a normalized economy. At this juncture, we continue to lean toward a slowdown in economic activity through the remainder of 2024.

U.S. employment remains strong, and we believe the pieces are in place for that to continue. Heavy fiscal stimulus from passed U.S. legislation for defense, infrastructure, semiconductors, and energy investments is only now beginning to be awarded. The spending should not peak until later in the decade. We believe relatively high energy costs in Europe, and Germany in particular, make manufacturing here relatively more attractive. In our view, political risk in China makes that country less attractive to do business in. We expect housing to continue to be challenged by high mortgage rates and affordability concerns, although a shortage of housing after more than a decade of underinvestment should help home prices. Consumer balance sheets remain generally healthy for the majority of Americans, and consumer credit quality remains strong at the moment.

Following years of low interest rates helping to drive ever-higher growth stock valuations, we feel value investing is ripe for a period of outperformance. We continue to find opportunities to invest in quality businesses with solid balance sheets and cash flows, where the return on invested capital (ROIC) is improving, and whose share prices have detached from our assessment of the fundamentals.

We thank you, as always, for your support.

Sincerely,

RS Value Team

**Sector Allocation<sup>7</sup>**

As of March 31, 2024

Sector	% of Portfolio
Communication Services	6.3%
Consumer Discretionary	3.0%
Consumer Staples	7.1%
Energy	7.9%
Financials	23.0%
Health Care	17.4%
Industrials	15.5%
Information Technology	8.6%
Materials	3.3%
Real Estate	2.8%
Utilities	3.4%

**Top 10 Holdings<sup>8</sup>**

As of March 31, 2024

Holding	% of Portfolio
Fairfax Financial Holdings Limited	3.53%
Citigroup Inc.	3.45%
Alphabet Inc. Class A	3.33%
Merck & Co., Inc.	3.07%
Goldman Sachs Group, Inc.	3.06%
Progressive Corporation	2.97%
Keurig Dr Pepper Inc.	2.77%
Cigna Group	2.76%
JPMorgan Chase & Co.	2.70%
US Foods Holding Corp.	2.35%

**Performance**

Average Annual Total Returns as of March 31, 2024

Victory RS Large Cap Alpha Fund (Class A – GPAFX)	First Quarter 2024	1-Year	3-Year	5-Year	10-Year	Since Inception (6/1/72)
without sales charge	12.73%	27.08%	10.66%	11.30%	9.32%	11.53%
with maximum sales charge (5.75%)	6.25%	19.77%	8.50%	9.99%	8.68%	11.40%
Russell 1000 <sup>®</sup> Value Index <sup>5</sup>	8.99%	20.27%	8.11%	10.32%	9.01%	—

**Past performance does not guarantee future results. The performance data quoted represents past performance and current returns may be lower or higher. The investment return and principal value will fluctuate so that an investor's shares, when redeemed, may be worth more or less than the original cost. To obtain performance information current to the most recent month-end, visit [www.vcm.com](http://www.vcm.com).** Returns include reinvestment of dividends and capital gains. Performance returns for periods of less than one year are not annualized. Fee waivers and/or expense reimbursements were in place for some or all periods shown, without which Fund performance would have been lower.

The Fund's total gross/net annual operating expense ratio as of the most current prospectus for the Class A Shares is 0.92%/0.89%. Net expense ratio reflects the contractual waiver and/or reimbursement of management fees through April 30, 2024. Other share classes are available, but not all share classes are available to all investors.

**Carefully consider a fund's investment objectives, risks, charges and expenses before investing. To obtain a prospectus or summary prospectus containing this and other important information, visit [www.vcm.com/prospectus](http://www.vcm.com/prospectus). Read it carefully before investing.**

**All investing involves risk, including the potential loss of principal.** To the extent the Fund invests in a small number of issuers, its value may be more negatively affected by a decline in the market value of a particular security than if the Fund invested in a larger number of issuers. Investments concentrated in an industry or group of industries may face more risks and exhibit higher volatility than investments that are more broadly diversified over industries or sectors. T

To the extent the Fund invests in a small number of issuers, its value may be negatively affected by the decline in market value of a particular security than if the Fund invested in a larger number of issuers. International investments may involve risk of capital loss from unfavorable fluctuation in currency values, from differences in generally accepted accounting principles or from economic or political instability in other nations.

The value of your investment is also subject to geopolitical risks such as wars, terrorism, environmental disasters, and public health crises; the risk of technology malfunctions or disruptions; and the responses to such events by governments and/or individual companies.

The opinions are as of the date noted and are subject to change at any time due to changes in market or economic conditions. The comments should not be construed as a recommendation of individual holdings or market sectors, but as an illustration of broader themes. Any discussions of specific securities should not be considered a recommendation to buy or sell those securities.

Index performance is shown for illustrative purposes only. It is not possible to invest directly in an unmanaged index.

- 1 The S&P 500® Index is a market-capitalization-weighted index designed to measure performance of the broad domestic economy through changes in the aggregate market value of 500 stocks representing all major industries.
- 2 The Russell 3000® Value Index is an unmanaged market-capitalization-weighted index that measures the performance of those companies in the Russell 3000® Index (which consists of the 3,000 largest U.S. companies based on total market

capitalization) with lower price-to-book ratios and lower forecasted growth values.

- 3 The Russell 2000® Value Index is a market-capitalization-weighted index that measures the performance of those companies in the Russell 2000® Index (which consists of the 2,000 smallest-cap companies in the Russell 3000® Index) with lower price-to-book ratios and lower forecasted growth values.
- 4 The Russell Midcap® Value Index is an unmanaged market-capitalization-weighted index that measures the performance of those companies in the Russell Midcap® Index with lower price-to-book ratios and lower forecasted growth values. (The Russell Midcap® Index measures the performance of the 800 smallest companies in the Russell 1000® Index, which consists of the 1,000 largest U.S. companies based on total market capitalization.)
- 5 The Russell 1000® Value Index is an unmanaged market-capitalization-weighted index that measures the performance of those companies in the Russell 1000® Index (which consists of the 1,000 largest U.S. companies based on total market capitalization) with lower price-to-book ratios and lower forecasted growth values.
- 6 The Russell 3000® Growth Index is an unmanaged market-capitalization-weighted index that measures the performance of those companies in the Russell 3000® Index (which consists of the 3,000 largest U.S. companies based on total market capitalization) with higher price-to-book ratios and higher forecasted growth values.
- 7 The Fund's holdings are allocated to each sector based on their GICS classification. If a holding is not classified by GICS, it is assigned a GICS designation by RS Investments. Cash includes short-term investments and net other assets and liabilities.
- 8 Portfolio holdings are subject to change and should not be considered a recommendation to buy or sell individual securities.

The Funds are distributed by Victory Capital Services, Inc., an affiliate of Victory Capital Management Inc., the Fund's investment adviser.

©2024 Victory Capital Management Inc.

V17.088 // 1Q 2024 RS Large Cap Alpha Fund COM