

1981 in the United States

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Events from the year **1981 in the United States**.

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Incumbents

Federal Government

- President: Jimmy Carter (D-Georgia) (until January 20), Ronald Reagan (R-California) (starting January 20)
- Vice President: Walter Mondale (D-Minnesota) (until January 20), George H. W. Bush (R-Texas) (starting January 20)
- Chief Justice: Warren E. Burger (Minnesota)
- Speaker of the House of Representatives: Tip O'Neill (D-Massachusetts)
- Senate Majority Leader: Robert Byrd (D-West Virginia) (until January 3), Howard Baker (R-Tennessee) (starting January 3)
- Congress: 96th (until January 3), 97th (starting January 3)

Governors and Lieutenant Governors

Governors

- Governor of Alabama: Fob James (Democratic)
- Governor of Alaska: Jay Hammond (Republican)
- Governor of Arizona: Bruce Babbitt (Democratic)
- Governor of Arkansas: Bill Clinton (Democratic) (until January 19), Frank D. White (Republican) (starting January 19)
- Governor of California: Jerry Brown (Democratic)
- Governor of Colorado: Richard Lamm (Democratic)
- Governor of Connecticut: William A. O'Neill (Democratic)
- Governor of Delaware: Pierre S. du Pont, IV (Republican)
- Governor of Florida: Bob Graham (Democratic)
- Governor of Georgia: George Busbee (Democratic)
- Governor of Hawaii: George Ariyoshi (Democratic)
- Governor of Idaho: John V. Evans (Democratic)
- Governor of Illinois: James R. Thompson (Republican)
- Governor of Indiana: Otis R. Bowen (Republican) (until January 12), Robert D. Orr (Republican) (starting January 12)
- Governor of Iowa: Robert D. Ray (Republican)
- Governor of Kansas: John W. Carlin (Democratic)
- Governor of Kentucky: John Y. Brown, Jr. (Democratic)
- Governor of Louisiana: David C. Treen (Republican)
- Governor of Maine: Joseph E. Brennan (Democratic)
- Governor of Maryland: Harry R. Hughes (Democratic)
- Governor of Massachusetts: Edward J. King (Democratic)
- Governor of Michigan: William Milliken (Republican)
- Governor of Minnesota: Al Quie (Republican)
- Governor of Mississippi: William Winter (Democratic)
- Governor of Missouri: Joseph P. Teasdale (Democratic) (until January 12), Kit Bond (Republican) (starting January 12)
- Governor of Montana: Thomas Lee Judge (Democratic) (until January 5), Ted Schwinden (Democratic) (starting January 5)
- Governor of Nebraska: Charles Thone (Republican)
- Governor of Nevada: Robert List (Republican)
- Governor of New Hampshire: Hugh J. Gallen (Democratic)
- Governor of New Jersey: Brendan Byrne (Democratic)
- Governor of New Mexico: Bruce King (Democratic)
- Governor of New York: Hugh Carey (Democratic)
- Governor of North Carolina: Jim Hunt (Democratic)
- Governor of North Dakota: Arthur A. Link (Democratic) (until January 6), Allen I. Olson (Republican) (starting January 6)
- Governor of Ohio: Jim Rhodes (Republican)
- Governor of Oklahoma: George Nigh (Democratic)
- Governor of Oregon: Victor G. Atiyeh (Republican)
- Governor of Pennsylvania: Dick Thornburgh (Republican)
- Governor of Rhode Island: J. Joseph Garrahy (Democratic)
- Governor of South Carolina: Richard Riley (Democratic)
- Governor of South Dakota: William J. Janklow (Republican)
- Governor of Tennessee: Lamar Alexander (Republican)
- Governor of Texas: Bill Clements (Republican)

- Governor of Utah: Scott M. Matheson (Democratic)
- Governor of Vermont: Richard A. Snelling (Republican)
- Governor of Virginia: John N. Dalton (Republican)
- Governor of Washington: Dixy Lee Ray (Democratic) (until January 14), John Spellman (Republican) (starting January 14)
- Governor of West Virginia: Jay Rockefeller (Democratic)
- Governor of Wisconsin: Lee S. Dreyfus (Republican)
- Governor of Wyoming: Edgar J. Herschler (Democratic)

Lieutenant Governors

- Lieutenant Governor of Alabama: George McMillan (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Alaska: Terry Miller (Republican)
- Lieutenant Governor of Arkansas: Joe Purcell (Democratic) (until January 19), Winston Bryant (Democratic) (starting January 19)
- Lieutenant Governor of California: Mike Curb (Republican)
- Lieutenant Governor of Colorado: Nancy E. Dick (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Connecticut: Joseph J. Fauliso (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Delaware: James D. McGinnis (Democratic) (until January 20), Michael N. Castle (Republican) (starting January 20)
- Lieutenant Governor of Florida: Wayne Mixson (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Georgia: Zell Miller (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Hawaii: Jean King (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Idaho: Phil Batt (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Illinois: Dave O'Neal (Republican) (until July 31), vacant (starting July 31)
- Lieutenant Governor of Indiana: Robert D. Orr (Republican) (until January 12), John Mutz (Republican) (starting January 12)
- Lieutenant Governor of Iowa: Terry E. Branstad (Republican)
- Lieutenant Governor of Kansas: Paul V. Dugan (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Kentucky: Martha Layne Collins (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana: Robert "Bobby" Freeman (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Maryland: Samuel Bogley (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts: Thomas P. O'Neill III (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Michigan: James H. Brickley (Republican)
- Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota: Lou Wangberg (Republican)
- Lieutenant Governor of Mississippi: Brad Dye (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Missouri: William C. Phelps (Republican) (until January 12), Kenneth Rothman (Democratic) (starting January 12)
- Lieutenant Governor of Montana: Ted Schwinden (Democratic) (until January 5), George Turman (Democratic) (starting January 5)
- Lieutenant Governor of Nebraska: Roland A. Luedtke (Republican)
- Lieutenant Governor of Nevada: Myron E. Leavitt (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of New Mexico: Roberto Mondragón (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of New York: Mario Cuomo (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of North Carolina: James C. Green (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of North Dakota: Wayne G. Sanstead (Democratic) (until month and day unknown), Ernest Sands (Republican) (starting month and day unknown)
- Lieutenant Governor of Ohio: vacant
- Lieutenant Governor of Oklahoma: Spencer Bernard (Democratic)

- Lieutenant Governor of Pennsylvania: William Scranton, III (Republican)
- Lieutenant Governor of Rhode Island: Thomas R. DiLuglio (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina: Nancy Stevenson (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of South Dakota: Lowell C. Hansen II (Republican)
- Lieutenant Governor of Tennessee: John S. Wilder (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Texas: William P. Hobby, Jr. (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Utah: David Smith Monson (Republican)
- Lieutenant Governor of Vermont: Madeleine M. Kunin (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Virginia: Chuck Robb (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Washington: John Cherberg (Democratic)
- Lieutenant Governor of Wisconsin: Russell A. Olson (Republican)

Events

January

- January 19 – United States and Iranian officials sign an agreement to release 52 American hostages after 14 months of captivity.
- January 20 – Ronald Reagan succeeds Jimmy Carter, as the 40th President of the United States. Minutes later, Iran releases the 52 Americans held for 444 days, ending the Iran hostage crisis.
- January 25 – Super Bowl XV: The Oakland Raiders defeat the Philadelphia Eagles 27–10 at the Louisiana Superdome in New Orleans, Louisiana.



January 20:
Ronald Reagan
begins his first of
two terms as
President

February

- February 10 – A fire at the Las Vegas Hilton hotel-casino kills 8 and injures 198.

March

- March 6 – After 19 years hosting the *CBS Evening News*, Walter Cronkite signs off for the last time.
- March 19 – Three workers are killed and 5 injured during a test of the Space Shuttle *Columbia*.
- March 21 – Michael Donald lynched.
- March 30 – U.S. President Ronald Reagan is shot in the chest outside a Washington, D.C. hotel by John Hinckley, Jr. Two police officers and Press Secretary James Brady are also wounded.
- March 31 – The 53rd Academy Awards, hosted by Johnny Carson, are held at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles. Robert Redford's directorial debut in *Ordinary People* wins Best Picture and Best Director.



January 20: The
Iran hostage crisis
ends with their
release

April

- April 12 – The Space Shuttle program: *Space Shuttle Columbia* (John Young, Robert Crippen) launches on the STS-1 mission, returning to Earth on April 14.
- April 18 – A Minor League Baseball game between the Rochester Red Wings and the Pawtucket Red Sox at McCoy Stadium in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, becomes the longest professional baseball

game in history: 8 hours and 25 minutes/33 innings (the 33rd inning is not played until June 23).

May

- May 15 – Donna Payant is murdered by serial killer Lemuel Smith, the first time a female prison officer has been killed on-duty in the United States.



March 30: Reagan assassination attempt

June

- June – The United States enters the severe early 1980s recession, exactly a year after the more minor 1980 recession ended; the Unemployment Rate is 7.2%
- June 5 – The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that five homosexual men in Los Angeles, California, have a rare form of pneumonia seen only in patients with weakened immune systems (the first recognized cases of AIDS).
- June 12 – Major League Baseball goes on strike, forcing the cancellation of 38 percent of the schedule.
- June 21 – Wayne Williams, a 23-year-old African American, is arrested and charged with the murders of two other African Americans. He is later accused of 28 others, in the Atlanta child murders.
- June 29 – Morris Edwin Robert, armed with a machine gun, holds hostages in the FBI section at the Atlanta, Georgia Federal Building. After three hours the hostages are rescued and Robert is killed in a shootout with Federal Agents.



April 12: The first Spacuttle launch

July

- July 7 – President Ronald Reagan nominates the first woman, Sandra Day O'Connor, to the Supreme Court of the United States.
- July 8 – California Governor Jerry Brown, faced with a Mediterranean fruit fly infestation, chooses to delay the aerial spraying of malathion, in favor of continuing ground-based eradication efforts.
- July 17
 - Hyatt Regency walkway collapse: Two skywalks filled with people at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Kansas City, Missouri collapse into a crowded atrium lobby, killing 114.
 - Israeli aircraft bomb Beirut, destroying multi-story apartment blocks containing the offices of PLO associated groups, killing approximately 300 civilians and resulting in worldwide condemnation and a U.S. embargo on the export of aircraft to Israel.^[1]
- July 27 – Adam Walsh, 6, is kidnapped from a Sears store in Hollywood, Florida.



July 17: Hyatt Regency walkway collapse

August

- August 1 – MTV (Music Television) is launched on cable television in the United States.
- August 5 – Ronald Reagan fires 11,359 striking air-traffic controllers who ignored his order for them to return to work.
- August 7 – *The Washington Star* ceases publication after 128 years.
- August 9 – Major League Baseball resumes from the strike with the All-Star Game in Cleveland's Municipal Stadium.

- August 10 – Exactly two weeks after his disappearance, the severed head of 6-year-old Hollywood, Florida native Adam Walsh is found in a canal in Vero Beach, Florida; to this day the rest of the boy's body has never been recovered.
- August 12 – The original Model 5150 IBM PC (with a 4.77 MHz Intel 8088 processor) is released in the United States at a base price of \$1,565.
- August 19
 - Gulf of Sidra incident (1981): Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi sends 2 Sukhoi Su-22 fighter jets to intercept 2 U.S. fighters over the Gulf of Sidra. The American jets destroy the Libyan fighters.
 - U.S. President Ronald Reagan appoints the first female U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Sandra Day O'Connor.
- August 24 – Mark David Chapman is sentenced to 20 years to life in prison, after being convicted of murdering John Lennon in Manhattan 8 months earlier.
- August 31 – A bomb explodes at the U.S. Air Force base in Ramstein, West Germany, injuring 20 people.

September

- September 10 – Picasso's painting "Guernica" is moved from New York City to Madrid.
- September 11 – A small plane crashes into the Swing Auditorium in San Bernardino, California, damaging the venue beyond repair.
- September 15 – The *John Bull* becomes the oldest operable steam locomotive in the world, at 150 years old, when it operates under its own power outside Washington, DC.
- September 17 – Ric Flair defeats Dusty Rhodes to win his first World Heavyweight Wrestling Championship in Kansas City.
- September 19 – Simon & Garfunkel perform The Concert in Central Park, a free concert in New York in front of approximately half a million people.
- September 25
 - Sandra Day O'Connor takes her seat as the first female justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.
 - The Rolling Stones begin their Tattoo You tour at JFK Stadium in Philadelphia.

October

- October 28 – The thrash metal band Metallica forms in Los Angeles.

November

- November 12 – STS-2: Space Shuttle *Columbia* (Joe Engle, Richard Truly) lifts off for its second mission.
- November 16 – Luke and Laura marry on the U.S. soap opera *General Hospital*; it is the highest-rated hour in daytime television history.
- November 23 – Iran-Contra scandal: Ronald Reagan signs the top secret National Security Decision Directive 17 (NSDD-17), authorizing the Central Intelligence Agency to recruit and support Contra rebels in Nicaragua.
- November 30 – Cold War: In Geneva, representatives from the United States and the Soviet Union begin negotiating intermediate-range nuclear weapon reductions in Europe (the meetings end inconclusively on Thursday, December 17).

December

- December 5 – American general James L. Dozier is kidnapped in Verona by the Italian Red Brigades.
- December 8 – The No. 21 Mine explosion in Whitwell, Tennessee kills 13.
- December 11 – Boxing: Muhammad Ali loses to Trevor Berbick; this proved to be Ali's last-ever fight.
- December 28 – The first American test-tube baby, Elizabeth Jordan Carr, is born in Norfolk, Virginia.

Ongoing

- Cold War (1945–1991)
- Iran hostage crisis (1979–1981)
- Early 1980s recession (1981–1982)

Births

- January 10 – Brian Joo, singer in (Fly to the Sky)
- January 31 – Justin Timberlake, singer-songwriter, actor, and record producer
- February 4 – Allen Forrest, rapper and producer
- February 17 – Joseph Gordon-Levitt, actor, director, producer, and writer
- March 1 – Brad Winchester, ice hockey player
- April 9 – Eric Harris, high school senior who committed the Columbine High School massacre (d. 1999)
- April 16 – Jake Scott, American football player
- May 11 – Daniel Ortmeier, baseball player
- July 4
 - Brock Berlin, American football player
 - Will Smith, American football player (d. 2016)
- July 6 – Mike Karney, American football player
- July 28
 - Billy Aaron Brown, American actor
 - Cole Williams, actor
- August 24 – Chad Michael Murray, actor, spokesperson and former fashion model
- September 11 – Dylan Klebold, high school senior who carried out the Columbine High School massacre (d. 1999)
- November 13
 - Rivkah, author and illustrator
 - Ryan Bertin, wrestler and coach
 - Kirsten Price, American model and adult film star
- November 15 – Drew Hodgdon, American football player
- November 25 – Chevon Troutman, basketball player
- December 2 – Britney Spears, singer, dancer and actress
- December 11
 - Jeff McComsey, author and illustrator
 - Kevin Phillips, actor
 - Zacky Vengeance, guitarist (Avenged Sevenfold)
- December 12 – Ronnie Brown, American football player

Deaths

- January 5
 - Frederick Osborn, philanthropist and eugenicist (b. 1889)
 - Harold Urey, winner of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry (b. 1893)
- January 7 – John Pascal, playwright, screenwriter, author and journalist (b. 1932)
- January 8 – Matthew Beard, child film actor (b. 1925)
- January 10
 - Katharine Alexander, film actress (b. 1898)
 - Richard Boone, Western film actor (b. 1917)
- January 11 – Beulah Bondi, actress (b. 1888)
- January 13 – Robert Kellard, film actor (b. 1915)
- January 25 – Adele Astaire, dancer (b. 1896)
- February 9
 - Jack Z. Anderson, U.S. Representative from California (b. 1904)
 - Bill Haley, rock & roll musician (b. 1925)
- February 22 – Ilo Wallace, wife of Henry A. Wallace, Second Lady of the United States (born 1888)
- March 5 – Yip Harburg, lyricist (b. 1896)
- March 7 – Bosley Crowther, film critic (b. 1905)
- March 9 – Max Delbrück, biologist, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine (b. 1906 in Germany)
- April 7 – Norman Taurog, film director (b. 1899)
- April 8 – Omar N. Bradley, U.S. Army General (b. 1893)
- April 12 – Joe Louis, African American heavyweight boxer (b. 1914)
- April 15 – John Thach, naval aviator and admiral (b. 1905)
- April 26
 - Jim Davis, television actor (b. 1909)
 - Madge Evans, actress (b. 1909)
- April 27 – John Aspinwall Roosevelt, businessman and philanthropist (b. 1916)
- April 28 – Cliff Battles, American footballer (Boston Redskins) (b. 1910)
- May 9 – Nelson Algren, novelist (b. 1909)
- May 11 – Bob Marley, reggae musician (b. 1945 in Jamaica)
- May 18
 - Arthur O'Connell, actor (b. 1908)
 - William Saroyan, dramatist and author (b. 1908)
- May 23 – George Jessel, actor and entertainer (b. 1898)
- May 28 – Mary Lou Williams, jazz pianist (b. 1910)
- July 27
 - Adam Walsh, murder victim and son of John Walsh (b. 1974)
 - William Wyler, film director (b. 1902)
- July 29 – Robert Moses, urban planner (b. 1888)
- November 7 – Will Durant, philosopher and writer (b. 1888)
- November 12 – William Holden, film actor (b. 1918)
- November 17 – Sibyl M. Rock, mathematician (b. 1909)
- November 27 – Lotte Lenya, singer (b. 1898 in Vienna)
- November 29 – Natalie Wood, actress (b. 1938)
- December 2 – Wallace Harrison, architect (b. 1895)
- December 6 – Harry Harlow, psychologist (b. 1905)
- December 7 – Hoagy Carmichael, composer and singer (b. 1899)

See also

- 1981 in American television
- List of American films of 1981

References

1. "The Bombing of Beirut". *Journal of Palestine Studies*. **11** (1): 218–225. 1981. doi:10.1525/jps.1981.11.1.00p0366x.

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