

GeoStory
MEDIA SPOTLIGHT

The '80s: The Decade that Made Us

Relive the political, environmental, and pop cultural moments that made the 1980s an important time in U.S. history.

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The 1980s were a decadent, disastrous, and innovative time in United States history. Beginning under the shadow of the Iran hostage crisis, and ending with the symbolic fall of [communism](#) with the [Berlin Wall](#), the '80s hosted an impressive gamut of environmental, political, and pop cultural events. The '80s saw the first woman appointed to the United States [Supreme Court](#) and unprecedented international cooperation to combat the disappearing [ozone](#) layer. [Ronald Reagan](#), a two-term president, re-worked American economic policy and challenged the [Soviet Union](#) to help topple the Berlin Wall. Americans celebrated the Miracle on Ice, sang along with Madonna on their Walkmans, and looked forward to the larger implementations of the World Wide Web and Starbucks coffeeshops.

Explore the continuity of 1980s people, places, and environments using this GeoStory inspired by the six-part series *The 80s*, from National Geographic Channel. A decade characterized by changing authority and governments, and culture, values, and technology, the influence of 1980s politics, environmental disasters, and pop cultural moments can still be seen today.

VOCABULARY

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
Berlin Wall	<i>noun</i>	(1961-1989) barrier erected by East Germany that divided the city of Berlin into halves controlled by East Germany and West Germany.
Chernobyl disaster	<i>noun</i>	(1986) major accident at the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, Ukraine.
chlorofluorocarbon (CFC)	<i>noun</i>	chemical compound mostly used in refrigerants and flame-retardants. Some CFCs have destructive effects on the ozone layer.
coffee	<i>noun</i>	plant native to Africa whose dried berries and seeds are used for a drink of the same name.
Cold War	<i>noun</i>	(1947-1991) conflict between the Soviet Union (and its allies) and the United States (and its allies). The two sides never confronted each other directly.
communism	<i>noun</i>	type of economy where all property, including land, factories and companies, is held by the government.

drought	<i>noun</i>	period of greatly reduced precipitation.
Exxon Valdez	<i>noun</i>	oil tanker that hit a reef in Alaska's Prince William Sound and spilled 40.9 million liters (10.8 million gallons) of oil into the Pacific Ocean in 1989.
famine	<i>noun</i>	an extreme shortage of food in one area during a long period of time.
Iron Curtain	<i>noun</i>	phrase used to describe the divide between free-market economies of the West and communist economies of the East during the Cold War.
low-Earth orbit	<i>noun</i>	between 160 kilometers (100 miles) and 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles) above Earth's surface.
oil spill	<i>noun</i>	accidental release of petroleum products into a body of water, either by an oil tanker or an offshore oil rig.
ozone	<i>noun</i>	form of oxygen that absorbs ultraviolet radiation.
Ronald Reagan	<i>noun</i>	(1911-2004) 40th president of the United States.
Soviet Union	<i>noun</i>	(1922-1991) large northern Eurasian nation that had a communist government. Also called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or the USSR.
Supreme Court	<i>noun</i>	highest judicial authority on issues of national or constitutional importance in the U.S.



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