

Meet America's

# Original NATIONS



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# A Land of Many Nations!

Thousands of years before European explorers ever reached the New World, American Indian nations with tribal governments had formed in the Americas. These American

Indian nations existed together much like the bordering nations of today. American Indian nations provided for defense, public safety, resource management and the overall welfare of the people.



## Impressive Politicians

European colonists came from nations governed by monarchs. Monarchs are single rulers born to a royal family, kings and queens who cannot be removed from office. In the New World, Europeans encountered a different form of government – the League of the Iroquois.

The League of the Iroquois were elected representatives of six Iroquois tribes who gathered to make important decisions about the tribes collectively. Unlike monarchs, these representatives could be dismissed from their positions if they did not please their people. During meetings the representatives debated a number of issues such as admitting new nations, waging war and addressing social issues. The debate finished when they reached an agreement.

Benjamin Franklin believed that American Indians had an advanced form of government and that it should be a model for the United States of America. The Iroquois counseled colonial leaders on the virtues of the Iroquois style of government, emphasizing the importance of unity, democracy and liberty. Eventually, 13 original colonies joined together to form a democracy – a self-governing system that resembled the League of the Iroquois.

## The Power of Sovereignty

The United States is a sovereign nation. As such, the United States can cede or obtain land, make decisions about the economy, enforce laws, administer justice or declare war. American Indian nations are also sovereign nations.

When Europeans arrived in the New World, they found sovereign nations – self-governed and independent American Indian nations with significant economic and military power. As Europeans developed a nation of their own, they negotiated treaties, which are binding legal promises between sovereign nations. During negotiations, American Indian leaders wisely included provisions that would protect their sovereign status. They ceded some of their land, but kept some property in the form of reservations.

Treaties granted rights to the colonists and outlined rights that would be retained by American Indians. They also made treaties that would ensure that American Indians could continue to live in a self-sufficient way. For example, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwa retained their fishing, hunting and gathering rights, while Makahs retained their whaling rights.

Over time, the United States did not uphold treaty rights and today American Indian nations continue to advocate for the enforcement of their rights established through treaties. Disregarding treaty rights reduced the sovereign status of American Indian nations and caused their economies to suffer. Many American Indian nations were left financially dependent on the United States.

## Reclaiming Sovereignty

Today, American Indian nations have to find creative ways to be economically self-sufficient again. American Indians proclaim they never gave up their right to self-government and should be allowed to govern themselves without interference. These rights were protected in treaties, but are now subject to special rules dictated by the United States.

Although American Indian nations have a lesser form of sovereignty, there are still a number of ways that individual tribes exercise their independence. They have created new businesses in the textile, environmental, tourism and gaming industries. New economies are continuously growing, allowing American Indian governments to fund social services such as health centers, schools and law enforcement agencies.

## Government in the News

Different nations have their own systems of government. The Iroquois and the United States have governments in which people elect representatives to make political decisions. Look through the newspaper for an article about a nation that has a different form of government. Write a paragraph describing that type of government and explaining some advantages and disadvantages of it.



## Fun Facts

Did you know that there are 561 federally recognized American Indian nations today?

# So Many Nations, So Many Cultures!

There are 561 federally recognized tribes in the United States, each with its own distinct way of life. Despite this tremendous diversity, the majority of Americans know little about these differences. In fact, many children

believe that American Indians are extinct or still live in stereotypical ways — in tipis wearing war paint and feathers. This is simply not the case. The American Indian population is as diverse as populations found on other continents like Europe, Asia and Africa.

## How Did That Happen?

American Indians migrated within the Americas over many thousands of years. Concentrations of large game animals changed consistently over a year, and in order to feed everyone, people would gather and disperse according to the season. Populations and cultural diversity grew, slowly and over time, creating new groups who then began to spread across the land in search of more food sources.

Migrants adapted to their new environments in different ways. People in the east built homes from wood, while people in the southwest used clay. People from the northwest coast fished for salmon and halibut, while people on the plains followed and hunted the buffalo. Over thousands of years, as people adjusted to different environments, climates and natural resources, they created hundreds of different cultural groups.



## The Diversity of American Indian Life Today

American Indian people live in the United States and in other countries. They live and work on reservations and in urban areas. They wear contemporary style clothes and traditional style clothes, sometimes elements of both at the same time. They attend social and religious events, serve in the military, manage businesses and engage in politics. American Indians are homemakers, artists, business owners, ranchers, farmers, construction workers, clerks, entertainers, professors, doctors, nurses, lawyers, scientists, engineers, educators, politicians, spiritual leaders and students like you.



## Culture in the News

Each American Indian nation has its own way of life — they eat different food, have different religious services and wear different clothing. Find an article that discusses a culture different from yours. Write a short paragraph describing what your typical day would be like if you were a part of that culture.

## ★ Fun Facts

Did you know there are 154 American Indian languages spoken in the United States today?



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