November is National American Indian Heritage Month. It is a time to celebrate the rich and diverse cultures, traditions, and histories of American Indians and Alaskan Natives, the first people of the United States.

Cherokee Indian and NASA physicist, J. C. Elliott-High Eagle, authored the legislation for American Indian Awareness Week. It was signed in 1976, making October 10-16 the first official week of national recognition for the American Indian since the founding of the Nation.

This set a precedent which was followed by later public laws that expanded the observance to what we now know as National American Indian Heritage Month.

According to the 2020 U.S. Census, the nation’s population of American Indians and Alaska Natives, including those of more than one race, was 9.7 million.

Currently, there are 574 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and more than 100 state-recognized tribes across the United States.

Each have their own unique Native history, beliefs, governance structure, and culture.

Sovereignty is the right of a nation or group of people to be self-governing and it is the most fundamental concept that defines the relationship between the government of the United States and governments of American Indian/Alaskan tribes.

American Indians and Native Alaskans are technically U.S. citizens first and have the additional option of becoming citizens of their tribe or village as enrolled tribal members.

The Department of Defense along with the rest of our nation, celebrates the first people to live on the land we all value. American Indians and Alaska Natives have bravely defended and shaped our country’s character and our cultural heritage.

A new generation has assumed this charge from their elders, and they continue to serve not only their nations but the United States with dignity and honor.