Q74 – Who lived in America before the Europeans arrived?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:
The people who lived in America before the European colonists arrived are called Native Americans, or American Indians. What happened to them is a sad chapter in our history.

Native Americans were ravaged by smallpox, measles, and other diseases from Europe against which they had no immunity. In the competition for land, Native Americans were literally outgunned. The tide of conquest proved unstoppable. Settlers soon outnumbered natives – and overwhelmed them. Tribes were forced onto reservations – land sometimes rejected as unfit for settlers.
Today, the Native American population is growing again. And tribes are being elevated through what some have called “an economic civil rights movement,” driven by a revival of self-governance.
Tribal lands sit atop almost a trillion dollars in energy reserves. But much of that land is held in trust by the federal government. Tribes must make their way through a thicket of red tape just to get permission to develop the land on which they live.
While they waited for federal restrictions to relax, the Winnebago tribe of Nebraska found a work-around. They channeled revenue from their casino to build more homes and raise household income. And a confederation of tribes in Oregon has trained their members in order to increase staffing at their health center.
As Crow leader Bill Yellowtail wrote, “Indian sovereignty means re-equipping Indian people with the dignity of self-sufficiency.” That’s a goal to which we should all aspire.