Photography is memory. Memory is photography. If it only were that simple! Maybe we need to be more precise. It’s never a good idea to begin an article with nitpicking, but in this case there is no other way. According to Collins English Dictionary (accessed [via dictionary.com](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/memory?s=t)) memory, the word, can stand for somewhat different things, including “the sum of everything retained by the mind” and “a particular recollection of an event, person, etc”. Let’s focus on the latter here, the particular recollection of something. We can hope that once we’ve figured out how photographs work as such recollections, we will be able to say something about how photographs relate to the whole, the sum of everything retained in the mind. [(more)](http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/photography_and_memory/)

To say that what we see in photographs is gone is to state the obvious. At the very least that particular moment is gone, never to come back, just like any other moment (whether we photograph or not). The person in the photo might be gone, in all kinds of ways. Gone from our life maybe, either by our choice or their choice or maybe by nobody’s choice (in the case of death). The fact that something is gone makes photographs so poignant, and it is what makes photographs memories. This, again, is obvious, because memories concern the past.

Photography is the past (maybe more accurately a past). To look at a photograph is to look at the past. But because photographs are created in such peculiar ways, they seem more reliable as tracers of the past than the mechanisms in our brains. As objects, photographs literally give us something to hold on to. Some photographs do this in particularly interesting ways. An old tintype, a Polaroid photograph, a slide - these types of photographs were not just taken in the same place as the object or person they shows us, the very materials were in the same place! In the case of a Polaroid it’s very conceivable that the person it shows actually looked at the photograph along with the photographer.

With negative film, this relationship becomes once removed - the negatives were in the same place, the print was in all likelihood made somewhere else. Digital photography has completely erased it - there is no negative, and the raw image exists in a way that is far removed from anything visual. The print… well, if there is a print, it was made somewhere else. Usually, there is no print. The digital image exists like a chimera - showing up on one’s computer or smart-phone screen, maybe for an instant, and then gone again. Digital photographs thus are closest to our memories - they are fleeting, they can be manipulated easily, and by their very nature, there are a lot of them, existing in some badly organized state.

But still… Even digital photographs give us something to hold on to. They exist outside or our minds. All photographs, when used as memories, give us something to hold on to.

Just like memories, photographs are created with intent. To work properly memory, that sum of everything retained by the mind, has to make a decision what to retain and what to forget. There are people who remember each and every moment in their lives. But most of us don’t. It’s not that clear how much control we have over what we want to remember and what not. And the relationship between that which we remember and that which really happened is also often not that clear.

In the case of photographs, we have more power over the process of retaining and forgetting. The process here involves the decision to take a photo or not, and then later whatever is later involved in the editing. The editing process is different for film and digital processes. I don’t want to go into any details here other than pointing out that some decision will be taken as to which images will be retained and which won’t. How this editing works is besides the point here. But the fact that we do have a conscious hand in it matters (even if the editing involves merely copying all images from a digital camera onto a computer hard drive, or uploading everything onto the internet).

Seen in this light, photographs are more perfect memories, because we are given more power to control our past (if we had that power with our actual memories, most therapists would be out of work). Conveniently, we tend to ignore the fact that photographs are manufactured memories. Or we are simply not aware of it (When writing these kinds of essays about photography it does not hurt to be aware of the fact that most people view photography in very different ways than academics, photographers, photo editors, photography writers, etc).

Photographs give us something to hold on to that shows us what we remember, often meaning something we want to remember, something we don’t want to forget. The negative in the latter, the not forgetting, seems crucial here: It usually involves a conscious effort (btw, it is just a coincidence I am writing this essay on Memorial Day). The mind will not easily let us do that, photographs will - as long as we are careful enough not to lose them. Photographs thus are not just manufactured memories, they are also expressions of our desire to hold on to something.

As such expressions, they can take on their own life, essentially becoming something completely different. Iconic photographs have, in effect, ceased to be photographs in the sense that the fact that they are photographs is dwarfed by everything that is constructed around them. In the case of the famous [Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raising_the_Flag_on_Iwo_Jima) photograph, for example, there is the [Marine Corps War Memorial](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine_Corps_War_Memorial), a sculpture created from the photograph. And of course there is stuff like [this](http://bad-postcards.tumblr.com/post/23929006946/my-god-my-country-my-flag-forever-the-sign-of).

In most cases, though, a photograph remains just that, a photograph. Societies have a need for iconic photographs, individuals don’t. But in both cases, there is a need to use photographs as a way to shape identity. Memories define identity, and photographs help us have a more active role in that process.