It was August 1974 and Sen. Barry Goldwater was denying stories that he had informed his colleagues that President Nixon was about to resign.

"I am not allowed to swear," he told reporters, "but it is the biggest lie I ever heard in my life."

An allegation on NBC News that he had not been allowed into the White House the previous night was also "a G.D. lie. I went home and cooked my dinner, had five or six drinks and went to bed."

Long before his death in 1998, such salty straight talk, his role in persuading Nixon to resign, and his libertarian positions on abortion, AIDS, and gay rights, established Goldwater as an American original. A conservative statesman, he seemed to a far cry from the 1964 Republican candidate for president about whom it had been said, "in your guts you know he's nuts."

John W. Dean, Nixon's White House counsel, and Barry Goldwater Jr., a former congressman from California, present here a "scrapbook" of his thoughts, as recorded in a journal, letters to friends, interviews, and speeches. More "nuggets than narrative," the book does, indeed, capture the voice of a "happy malcontent" who "managed to enjoy the hell out of doing whatever he was doing."

Like Ronald Reagan, Goldwater had several foundational principles from which he did not deviate. He believed that the federal government should refrain from regulating the economy, balance its budget, return power to states and municipalities, and pursue an aggressive anti-communist foreign policy.

He thought politics should be clean and conducted openly. Although he was by no means a sophisticated political strategist, Goldwater was ahead of his time in predicting a realignment of southern Democrats with Republicans of the Middle West and West.

A valentine to its subject, "Pure Goldwater" is selective. As a member of the Phoenix City Council, Dean and Barry Jr. indicate that Goldwater worked to desegregate restrooms at the airport and contributed his own money to fund a lawsuit to desegregate the public high school. But they do not address his opposition to the Civil Rights Bill of 1964.

Perhaps inadvertently, the authors also reveal flaws in Goldwater's judgment. He dismissed Harry Truman in 1952 as an "s.o.b." whose Fair Deal was paving the road to socialism — and later embraced him as a fine president. He believed, for a time, that a foreign policy of containment would "make it impossible for communism not to succeed." He thought Spiro Agnew would make a good president and refused to believe that he had taken bribes.

And he acknowledged that he should have known as early as the 1950s that Richard Nixon was a "two-fisted, four-square liar."

And yet, Goldwater remains a compelling figure, especially in comparison to the current crop of U.S. senators. You can't help liking a guy who counseled Richard Nixon to waive his pardon and offer to stand trial before any court in Washington. Who wanted senators — and not their staffs — to take care of the people's business by preparing and evaluating proposed legislation. And who wished "somebody could tell me what the hell is wrong with the news media."

"Pure Goldwater" is by no means the last word on the senator from Arizona. But it's a fitting tribute to the founding father of American conservatism — and of the real "straight talk express."

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VALENTINE
Barry Goldwater: The new book "Pure Goldwater" is a tribute to the late senator from Arizona.