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WASHINGTON, Oct. 21— Early this week, William Hubbs Rehnquist, Assistant Attorney General sent a memorandum to the American Bar Association defending Judge Mildred L. Lillie, who had been proposed to the association by President Nixon as a possible Supreme Court Justice. Tonight, Mr. Rehnquist, a conservative Arizonan, was himself nominated by Mr. Nixon for a seat on the Court.

It was only this afternoon that Mr. Rehnquist's name was even mentioned in speculation about the President's choices. But, in retrospect, observers here realize that he fit perfectly the President's job description.

He was described by his colleagues in the Justice Department as a brilliant lawyer who, having once been a clerk to the late Justice Robert H. Jackson, is completely versed in the Court's operations.

Politically, he is a Goldwater Republican, who came to Washington in 1968 at the beginning of the Nixon Administration to head the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel, a position described by the President tonight as "the President's Lawyer's lawyer."

Among his associates in the Government, Mr. Rehnquist is known as a man more attuned to the law than to politics. He has gone out of his way, one colleague said, to participate in interviewing law graduates who are applying for jobs, and questions about the applicant's political affiliation seem unimportant.

In his 33 months in the capital, Mr. Rehnquist has often been the spokesman for the Administration on police surveillance and other issues of criminal law.

Comes Under Fire

In March, he came under fire from civil libertarians after he told a Senate subcommittee that he vigorously opposed any legislation that would restrict the Government's ability to gather information about American citizens. He also told Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., the North Carolina Democrat who heads the Senate Constitutional Right Subcommittee, that, although it would be "inappropriate" and a "waste of the taxpayers' money," it would not violate the Senator's rights for the Govern-

ment to put him under surveillance.

In a speech last year at the University of Arizona, Mr. Rehnquist said it would not be "at all unreasonable" for the Government to ask the Supreme Court to reverse its decision in the case of *Miranda v. Arizona*, when the Court declared that criminal suspects must be informed of such prerogatives as the right to remain silent and the right to a lawyer.

No litigant, including the Government of the United States, Mr. Rehnquist had said, was "required to accept any particular decision of the Supreme Court in the field of constitutional law as *stare decisis*." *Stare decisis* is the doctrine of strict adherence to prior judicial decisions.

Bill Rehnquist was born Oct. 1, 1924, in Milwaukee, and he attended public school there. He went West to college—to Stanford University, where he received his undergraduate and law degrees—and then came to Washington in 1952 to serve as a clerk to the late Justice Jackson.

Supporter of Goldwater

The next year he went to Phoenix, began private law practice and became active in Republican politics. He was a strong supporter of Barry Goldwater in the 1964 Presidential campaign.

Mr. Rehnquist is known as an exceptionally hard worker, and this morning his desk was piled high and his secretary said he was very busy.

He Rehnquist is a tall, long-sideburned and athletic-looking and he looks younger than his 47 years.

Mr. Rehnquist (pronounced like Wren-quist) was married in 1953 to the former Natalio Cornell of San Diego. The couple has three children, James, Janet and Nancy, who attend schools in Fairfax County, Va., where the Rehnquists live.

Among his colleagues in the Justice Department, Mr. Rehnquist is respected first and foremost as a lawyer. President Nixon described him tonight as a conservative, "but only in a judicial, not in a political sense."

A close associate said afterward: "There's no question in my mind that he's a top-notch lawyer, both in his writing ability and his legal acumen. Plus, he's a hell of a nice guy who never blows up."