**Headline:** Rich Men Versus the Rest of Us

**Teaser:** The new country hit song, “Rich Men North of Richmond,” embodies the GOP’s narrative of white male resentment. But collectivism and an embrace of racial diversity are far more powerful and popular.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

American conservatism has always been excellent at storytelling. Convincing people to back regressive policies isn’t easy and therefore stories generating fear and resentment in particular work quite well to help garner support for lowering taxes on the wealthy or pouring money into militarism and policing instead of into healthcare and housing.

Effective storytelling is the reason why right-wing commentators like [Joe Rogan](https://www.newsweek.com/oliver-anthony-joe-rogan-win-viral-song-success-1820169) and [Laura Ingraham](https://www.fox8tv.com/laura-ingraham-we-used-to-have-a-shared-culture-but-the-left-destroyed-it/) elevated “[Rich Men North of Richmond](https://www.billboard.com/music/chart-beat/oliver-anthony-music-rich-men-north-of-richmond-number-one-debut-hot-100-1235396681/),” a song with a simple message by a relatively unknown country artist, and helped boost it all the way to the top of the Billboard Hot 100 chart. The new song from country musician Oliver Anthony has suddenly become an anthem of the right, so much so that it was featured in the [Republican Party’s first candidate debate](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/rich-men-north-of-richmond-hits-gop-debate-stage/2023/08/24/f0f81403-729e-400f-8c19-d3dd36984bbb_video.html) for the 2024 presidential nomination.

[Fox debate moderator Martha MacCallum](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/rich-men-north-of-richmond-hits-gop-debate-stage/2023/08/24/f0f81403-729e-400f-8c19-d3dd36984bbb_video.html) asked Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, “Why is this song striking such a nerve in this country right now?” DeSantis answered, it’s because “our country is in decline right now. This decline is not inevitable, it’s a choice.”

Anthony’s [song lyrics](https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/oliveranthony/richmennorthofrichmond.html) have a pithy answer to why the United States is apparently in decline: “We got folks in the street, ain’t got nothin’ to eat.” He then pivots to the source of this injustice: “the obese milkin’ welfare.”

While he explicitly engages in fat shaming, he doesn’t spell out that he’s actually referencing people of color when he talks about people milking welfare. But that’s because he doesn’t have to. Welfare recipients have long been a dog whistle for Black Americans in particular, a trope that [Ronald Reagan popularized](https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/05/21/she-was-stereotyped-welfare-queen-truth-was-more-disturbing-new-book-says/) all the way to the White House, building on white people’s resentment of Black people benefitting from tax-funded programs. The [myth](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/americans-welfare-perceptions-survey_n_5a7880cde4b0d3df1d13f60b) that Black people disproportionately use welfare programs has persisted within the American public, even though in reality, welfare programs have [disproportionately benefited white people](https://www.businessinsider.com/welfare-policy-created-white-wealth-largely-leaving-black-americans-behind-2020-8) and even excluded Blacks.

No wonder Republican politicians and their voting base love Anthony’s song. It correctly identifies economic insecurity but instead of laying the blame at the feet of wealthy corporations who are [hiking up food prices](https://www.vox.com/money/23641875/food-grocery-inflation-prices-billionaires), or GOP representatives who are [cutting food stamps](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/31/politics/wic-benefits-cut-culture-war/index.html#:~:text=GOP%20lawmakers%20have%20proposed%20curtailing,buy%20fresh%20fruits%20and%20vegetables.), it instead scapegoats poor people of color and paints them as wily, greedy, fraudsters who take advantage of hardworking (read: white, male) Americans.

But, what about the “rich men” Anthony sings about? That too could be coded language for Democrats who are painted in the GOP’s worldview as [well-educated, privileged liberal elites](https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/10/09/david-shor-democrats-privileged-college-kid-problem-514992) and embodied by people like Hunter Biden. These “rich men” are ensuring that welfare recipients (read: people of color) suck up all the resources, sending white men like Anthony to an early grave.

The victims of injustice in [Anthony’s song](https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/oliveranthony/richmennorthofrichmond.html) are precisely the ones that the GOP has been trying to uplift: white men. “Young men are puttin’ themselves six feet in the ground, ‘Cause all this damn country does is keep on kickin’ them down,” sings Anthony. He doesn’t explicitly say “white men,” because—again—he doesn’t have to. He signals it with his own demographic saying, “It’s a damn shame what the world’s gotten to for *people like me*… ” To be fair, he adds, “and people like you.”

Without actually spelling out the idea that people of color are taking over the nation and forcing white men to an early grave, Anthony’s song cleverly implies this powerful right-wing myth.

The narrative throughline of Republican ideology is the myth that America was a country built by white men but is now a nation where white men are deeply suffering. As America falls apart from this tragic turn of events, only white men can save it and can “Make America Great Again.”

Given how hard the GOP has beaten this drum it’s a wonder more Americans don’t buy this ludicrous, racist, and false idea. Just under a [quarter](https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meetthepressblog/maga-movement-widely-unpopular-new-poll-finds-rcna81200) of all Americans believe it. And nearly double that amount actively rejects it. And that is because the counternarrative to this grim world of white male resentment is a beautiful and far more seductive story: that America is a multi-hued nation where everyone has rights and everyone deserves freedom from hunger, homelessness, and illness. Although this is an ideal that has never been realized, especially for [Black](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/health-disparities-between-blacks-and-whites-run-deep/) and [Brown](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/latinos-often-lack-access-to-healthcare-and-have-poor-health-outcomes-heres-how-we-can-change-that/) people, it remains an aspirational goal.

Indeed, even Anthony can’t help but embrace this collectivist idea. In an [interview](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/rich-men-north-of-richmond-hits-gop-debate-stage/2023/08/24/f0f81403-729e-400f-8c19-d3dd36984bbb_video.html), the young singer identified “the roots of what made this country great in the first place,” as “our sense of community.”

He then said, “We are the melting pot of the world, that’s what makes us strong, is our diversity.” There’s no other way to interpret his words than the idea that the nation’s racial diversity is a good thing.

He then went further, saying, “We need to learn to harness that and appreciate it and not use it as a political tool to keep everyone separate.”

Whether or not Anthony actually believes such ideas that seem to be the opposite of his own hit song, or whether he was simply pandering to the cameras, is unclear. What *is* clear is that even the GOP’s newest poster boy, when asked to explain his position, publicly backed collectivism and embraced racial diversity.

In fact, in a [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cv9uMXiY29s) he released on YouTube, Anthony even disavowed being associated with the GOP, saying it was ironic that his song was played at the Republican debate. He “wrote that song about those people,” he said, adding, “I do hate to see that song being weaponized.”

The truth, of course, is that rich men from the Democratic Party, but even more so from the Republican Party, [represent the wealthiest people](https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2020/04/majority-of-lawmakers-millionaires/) in the nation and [routinely use that power](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/09/13/us/politics/congress-members-stock-trading-list.html) to make themselves and their ilk richer. When a reporter in May 2023 asked House Speaker Kevin McCarthy if his party would consider [increasing taxes on the wealthy](https://newrepublic.com/post/172782/republicans-literally-laugh-off-idea-taxing-rich-fix-budget), he spat out “No” before the question was over.

The GOP’s cover story, to obscure its real agenda of making rich men richer, is one of white racial resentment. And to the party, Anthony’s song embodies this cover story. But his interview reveals what most Americans, given the chance to think for themselves, would embrace: that it’s rich men versus the rest of us.

British folk singer [Billy Bragg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGNFR7pgxDY) attempted to rewrite the GOP’s new anthem to better reflect the sort of working-class ideals that are popular all over the world. He identified the true perpetrators of injustice as, “Rich men earning north of a million,” who “wanna keep the working folk down.”

Instead of fat shaming and echoing rightwing dog whistles about people of color, Bragg sang:

“If you’re struggling with your health, and you’re putting on the pounds,  
Doctor gives you opiates to help you get around,  
Wouldn’t it be better for folks like you and me,  
If medicine was subsidized and healthcare was free.”

In a [Facebook post](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0vp6ygWFYuBLWrsveewXU5dJkPNGCZt3RJWFaNMoChdzsNmEXHvtRcvViWAova51bl&id=100085643337139), Oliver revealed that he has struggled with depression and anxiety. Clearly, he, like the rest of us, would benefit from tax-funded, free healthcare.

Anthony also laid out his financial troubles and struggle with unemployment, one that so many Americans can relate to. Again, Bragg had a good answer to this problem in his version of the country music hit: “Join a union, fight for better pay… join a union brother, organize today.” Given Anthony’s reluctance to be co-opted by the right, perhaps he may yet be convinced by this.